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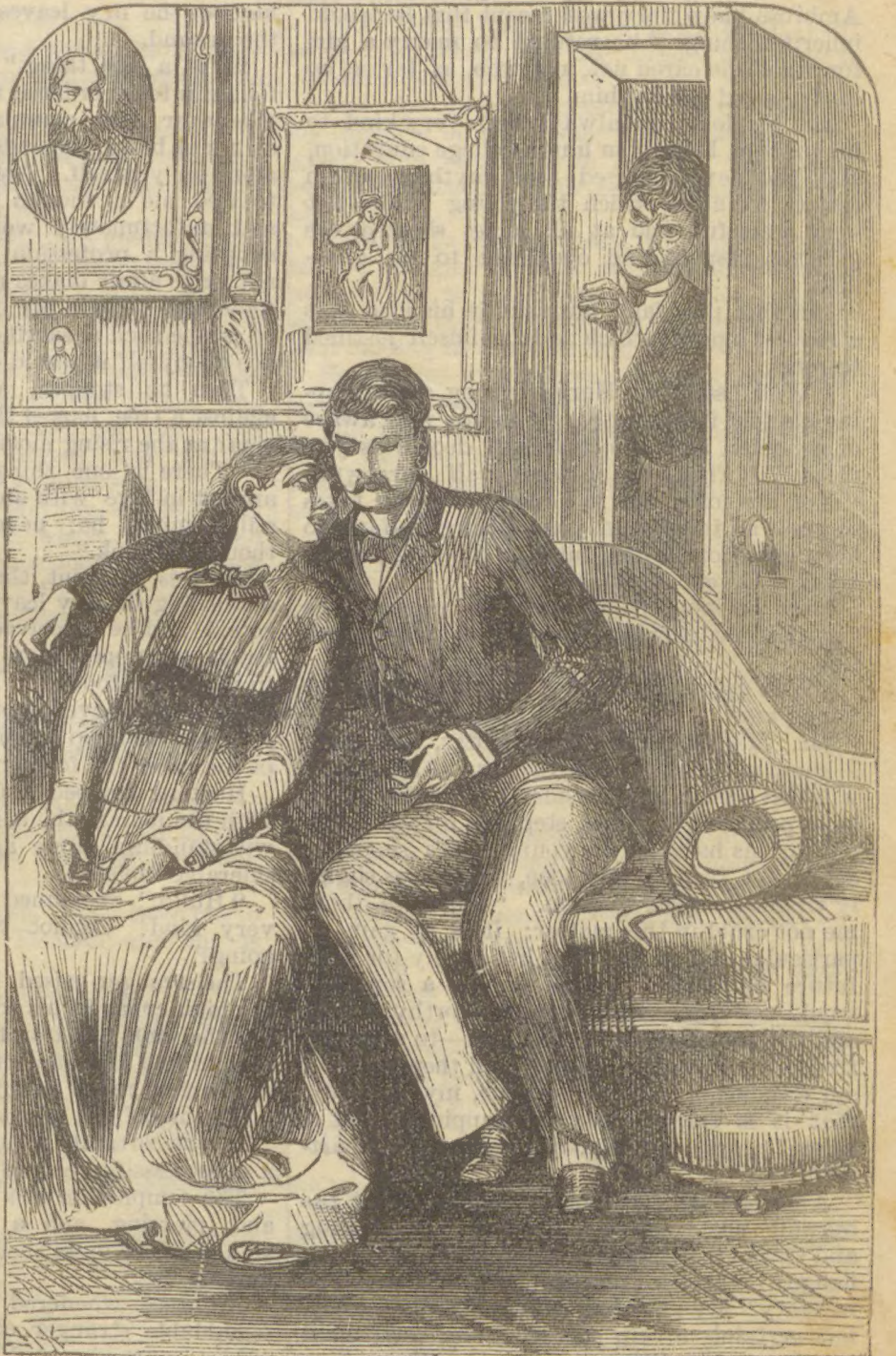
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SHE SLOWLY DREW IT FROM THE BOSOM OF HER DRESS.



"I FEEL SO DEPRESSED AT THOUGHT OF YOUR LEAVING ME!"

Blind Devotion; or, Love Against the World.

BY ALICE FLEMING.

CHAPTER I.

WHAT MAN IS THAT?

"REST assured you cannot do better. Clara Farman is both beautiful and good-tempered."

The speaker was Mr. Henry Marlow, a gentleman of about fifty years of age. He had, no doubt, been handsome in his younger days, but now his features were sharp, and his face deeply lined. He was seated in an arm-chair by the fire; fronting him was a young man half reclining on an ottoman, and to whom he was speaking.

"Besides, it is my particular wish," continued Mr. Marlow; "and that should have some weight."

"Certainly," responded the young man, getting into a more upright position. "But it is hard, very hard, sir, that I should be compelled to marry one for whom I care nothing—indeed, whom I have never even thought of, except as the daughter of your most intimate friend."

"She is of good family," the elder went on, "and tolerably well off. But that is of little moment; for if you wed her, your fortune will be sufficient for both."

"As for the good family," said the young man, "her father is a retired tradesman, I believe—a wool-merchant, or something of the sort."

"But her mother is the daughter of titled parents; and Farman, if a retired tradesman, is a gentleman."

"Oh, I have no doubt of that," said the younger man. "Indeed, the whole family are very agreeable; but when you talk of my wedding—"

"Enough!" impatiently interrupted Mr. Marlow. "You are foolish and know not what injury you are doing yourself by refusing to entertain that which I have proposed."

"I am quite willing to entertain it, sir, but you appear to insist that I should at once marry Miss Farman."

"I do not wish to force you into compliance, but your positive refusal would incur my displeasure, and that, you must be aware, would not be to your interest!"

Ambrose Harford sat, for some time, in deep thought.

His father had been a naval officer, and had died when his son was a boy at school.

Mr. Marlow and the elder Harford had been closely intimate, and the former had consented, at the request of his dying friend, to adopt the boy, and had soon learned to look on him as his own son.

The father of Ambrose had died poor, having but a few hundred pounds to leave him. But his guardian was rich and generous. He had given Ambrose to understand that he would inherit all at his guardian's death, and now threatened him with his displeasure, which Ambrose knew very well meant that he would inherit nothing, if he refused to marry a girl for whom he cared not, and who, as far as he knew, cared not for him.

Mr. Marlow had always been very kind to his *protege*, had given him a college education, and had never refused him anything within reason, for all of which the young fellow felt very grateful, and at all times showed the greatest respect and obedience to his guardian.

But this marriage business, in his idea, was a request against which he felt himself justified to rebel.

"Well," said Mr. Marlow, rising, and stamping his foot impatiently, "you are now aware of my wish, and of course will decide as you please." Then, in a tone half sorrowful, "You are fortunate in having one who takes so great an interest in your future welfare, to keep you from falling into the life-long misery which I have endured, and—"

Here he stopped abruptly, on noticing the surprised manner in which Ambrose looked at him.

"You speak of misery, sir," exclaimed the young man.

Mr. Marlow cried, impatiently, "Enough; I knew not what I was saying. And now I will leave you; and consider well that which I have proposed." Then, stepping forward, and placing his hand on the young man's shoulder, continued, in a kindly tone, which was slightly tremulous with emotion. "Ambrose, think me not cruel in this matter; it is to gain no particular end of my own, but purely for your future happiness. I love you as a son, and would see you wedded to one worthy of you and the honorable name you bear—to save you from—" He again stopped, and then said, "I am wandering; but believe me, my dear boy, that it is solely for your happiness that I labor;" and he walked from the apartment.

Ambrose sat for some time, staring at the burning coals without moving; then, rising and stretching himself, exclaimed, "Well, I'm hanged if this does not beat all! What is the mystery? My guardian is undoubtedly a good, but certainly a very strange man; and what has he to do with misery? Has there been some event in his past history which even now it gives him pain to recall? But why force me into this marriage? I don't think I like Miss Farman, and she doesn't like me, I hope."

Reseating himself, and leaning back in his chair with one arm thrown over his head, he went on: "I have no right to refuse anything to the man who has been as the best of fathers to me; but, hang it! what am I to do? I cannot tie myself to the first woman I am asked to marry. Upon my soul, sir, this is too bad—most ungenerous!" And Ambrose gave his head a disconsolate shake.

Ambrose Harford was a handsome fellow, in complexion neither dark nor fair. His eyes were gray, and beamed with the light of intelligence. His nose was of the Greek type, and he wore a mustache the like of which many

young fellows of the day would be proud to possess.

After remaining some time in thought, and every now and again muttering broken sentences, he started to his feet excitedly, and exclaimed, "Suppose Miss Farman refuses to accept me, which I most sincerely trust she will, then my guardian cannot reproach me with disobedience to his wishes. I must make myself as disagreeable as possible to her."

Then, donning his overcoat, he went out into the sharp, frosty air.

Mr. Marlow's residence, the Hall, was situated in a picturesque spot, not a great distance from London.

It was a very old place, and almost covered with ivy.

The house was surrounded by a well-kept garden, beyond which was a wood.

Ambrose strode in among the trees, and, lighting a cigar, walked on under the bare branches thoughtfully, scattering aside with his foot the dry leaves which lay thickly on the ground.

"'Tis a fine thing," he muttered, "that a fellow is to be ordered to marry whoever and whenever the commander chooses. That comes of being dependent on others, and not alone on yourself. My guardian has always treated me as though I were indeed his son, and unfortunately would never hear of my adopting a profession; and now, hang it! this marriage affair makes me wish that I could do something to gain my own livelihood in order to escape such a sacrifice; for a terrible sacrifice of myself it would certainly be."

Then he stopped, and leaning his back against a tree, looked through the smoke of his cigar at the rising moon.

"There is one thing," he soliloquized; "I am not in love with any one in particular, but still I might be; never with Miss Farman, though, I think."

At this moment, the rustle as of some one disturbing the dry leaves caused him to look round, and he perceived, at a little distance, a figure, enveloped in a long ulster, advancing to where he stood.

Ambrose moved from the tree just as the stranger came up to him, without appearing to be aware of the former's presence.

Harford stepped aside to avoid a collision with the man in the ulster; but the latter, notwithstanding, came against him with considerable violence.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Ambrose; "you are very kind! Cannot you see where you are going?"

The stranger raised his chin from beneath the high collar of his coat, and said, "I might put the same question to you. I did not expect to find any one loitering in the wood on such a cold night as this."

The moonlight fell on his face as he spoke.

It was certainly a handsome, but not at all a prepossessing, countenance.

The complexion was swarthy, the eyes dark and piercing, and a long black mustache, waxed at the ends, shaded the thin, determined-looking lips.

Ambrose wondered who this apparently formidable stranger could be; and that individual, muttering, "Yes, 'tis he; I have met him before," walked on, leaving Ambrose still wondering.

CHAPTER II.

BLIND DEVOTION.

At the very time that Ambrose and his guardian were talking of Clara Farman, that young lady was wrapping herself in thick furs, preparatory to a walk abroad.

Miss Farman was rather tall, with a beautiful oval-shaped face, and bright brown eyes. Her hair fell in little frizzed ringlets from under a seal-skin cap, over her smooth, white forehead.

As she fastened her long, fur-lined cloak, and stood twisting her neck in order to see that its folds fell gracefully, she said, "Louis admires this cloak; he said so."

Then drawing on a natty pair of fur-lined gloves, she went to the door, and stood in a listening attitude.

"It is so annoying!" she exclaimed, pettishly. "One cannot stir without being questioned. But they are shut in the back drawing-room this cold night, and I can slip out without being seen."

Quietly she descended the stairs, and was about to open the front door, when a maid-servant came from one of the rooms, and said, "Oh, Miss Clara, your mamma has sent me in search of you!"

Clara stamped her little foot, and said, "Then say you cannot find me. I am going out."

"But—" began the maid.

"But what?" irritably asked Clara.

"Your mamma will be angry, miss."

"Mind your own business," sharply returned the young lady, "and do as I bid you."

"Very well, Miss Clara, but I don't like this sort of thing."

Without making any reply, Clara opened the door, and there was Mr. Marlow, who was at that moment about to knock.

Clara bit her lip in vexation, and to the gentleman's "How do you do?" turned and walked toward the drawing-room, angrily tearing off her gloves as she went.

Then hastily removing the cloak from her shoulders, and snatching from her head the coquettish seal-skin cap, she threw them onto the hall table, and turning the handle of the drawing-room door, walked in, saying, "Here is Mr. Marlow," and dropped into a seat.

The gentleman followed her in, and was greeted warmly by all the occupants of the room, save only Clara.

Mr. Farman, who was a short, stout man, with a round, red face, and shining bald head, rose from his seat very close to the fire, and extending his hand to the new-comer, said, heartily, "Glad to see you, my boy! You are brave to venture out such cold weather as this. Draw near the fire. Why didn't young Ambrose come with you, eh?"

Clara shook herself and frowned at the mention of the name.

Mrs. Farman, who was some years her husband's junior, and who was seated gracefully on a couch, smiled sweetly as Mr. Marlow entered.

She had been a beautiful woman, and, indeed, had not yet lost all her charms; but there was an air of languid disappointment on her features, and in every movement.

The daughter of titled but poor parents, she had wedded David Farman because he was rich. She had had a lover who had died abroad; and, not disliking the good-tempered merchant, had consented to be his wife.

Clara was their only child, and had been completely spoiled.

"It is colder than ever to-night, I think," said Mr. Farman, rubbing his hands. Then, turning round in his chair, "My dear," (to his wife) "there's a draught somewhere, I'm certain."

"I do not feel it," said his wife.

Mr. Farman rung the bell, and said to the man who appeared, "James, there's a window open somewhere. No; don't say there is not; I'm sure there is."

The man left the apartment, grumbling to himself that master would never give you a chance to speak.

"Let me see," presently said the master of the house. "Why was it you did not bring Ambrose along with you?"

"He was not in the way when I left home," answered Mr. Marlow.

"Ah! fine young fellow. What do you say, Clara, my love?"

Clara did not say anything; but sat looking very grumpy.

"Are you not well to-night, Clara?" asked her mother.

"Yes, mamma; quite well, thank you," shortly answered the young lady.

"It's this wretched cold weather," put in her

father. "Who can be well? Come nearer the fire, my dear."

Clara cast a longing look toward the door, and obeyed.

How she wished she could escape from the room!

Mr. Marlow looked at her admiringly, as he said, "You certainly do not appear in very good spirits to-night, Miss Clara."

"Do I not?" said the girl, with a little musical laugh. "Perhaps, as papa says, it's the cold weather."

Then they chatted, and many times did the two gentlemen allude to Ambrose, Mr. Farman winking knowingly and good-naturedly at his daughter whenever the young man's name was mentioned.

Then Clara was asked for one of her pretty songs; and, reluctantly going to, and seating herself at the piano, commenced to sing.

Her thoughts were not with the song. She was thinking of a dark, handsome young fellow who was, as she knew, awaiting her in the wood not far from her father's house.

Having finished the song, she rose; and, not heeding the thanks which her hearers gave, left the apartment.

"Clara, is dull to-night," quietly said Mrs. Farman.

"Yes," assented her husband, drawing closer to the fire. "You may depend it is because young Ambrose has not come; and I'm rather glad she does think something of the young fellow, for there is nothing I should like better than to see my little Clara and he married. What do you say, friend Marlow, eh?"

"Well, such has always been my wish," answered that gentleman.

But he did not tell how Ambrose desired to thwart that wish. It was not necessary; for he was determined that the marriage, sooner or later, should take place.

Meantime, Clara had snatched her cloak and cap from the table; and, quickly donning them, made her way into the open air.

The night was dark, the moon not having risen.

It was freezing hard; but Clara did not feel the cold. She was in a fever of excitement.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "if I do not see him, what will he think? And he is so quick-tempered that he may have gone, and will never come back perhaps." Then, clenching her little hands, "All through that Mr. Marlow, with his bothering Ambrose! How I wish papa would not be so foolish in wishing me to marry him! But I will not. There!"

Then she quickened her pace to a run, and was soon at the entrance to the wood.

She stopped, peered round, and listened. But no sound of footsteps smote her ear.

"He has gone!" she cried, passionately.

"Oh, why did I not get away sooner?"

And she cried, and stamped her foot with vexation.

The form of a man, young and handsome,

stole from behind the trunk of a large tree, and caught her in his arms.

"Louis!" cried Clara, joyfully recognizing her lover.

"Clara, my darling," said the young man, "why are you so late? I have been waiting till I am nearly frozen. I began to fear that it was Ambrose"—with a deep stress on the name—"who kept you?"

"No, Louis," said the girl; "I have not seen Ambrose, nor do I wish to see him. You know 'tis you alone whom I care to see!"

The young man pressed her closer to his side.

"And does your father still talk of your marriage with that man?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Clara, with a sigh.

"But you will never be his?"—with anxiety.

"No, Louis. But why will you not take me away, make me your wife, and then—"

"I cannot at present, dearest!" softly said Louis. "Do not ask me why, but believe that I love you devotedly, and will ere long make you mine!"

Clara shrugged her shoulders, and said, in an

injured tone, "You are so strange, Louis; you tell me nothing of yourself. You were not so reserved at Brighton."

"No, sweetheart; but things have altered, and my pet must wait awhile longer; and then together we will leave the country, and that fellow Ambrose, for a sunnier clime. And now, my darling, farewell. Assure me once more of your love!"

"I love you dearly—oh, so dearly!" exclaimed the girl, impulsively.

"And will always be true to me—will never consent to marry Ambrose?"

"Never!" repeated the girl.

"And now farewell until three days hence, when you will again meet me on this spot."

And, leaving Clara, he walked on through the wood, where he ran against his supposed rival, as related in the preceding chapter.

CHAPTER III.

ON THE ICE.

AMBROSE HARFORD had serious thoughts of leaving his guardian's roof and seeking his own living.

"Why should I marry Clara Farman," he argued to himself, "to fall in love with somebody else six months after she has become mine? No; it will never do."

And he determined that, if his guardian still insisted, he would leave the home that had sheltered him since childhood.

One morning Mr. Marlow summoned the young man to his presence, after having been to the Farmans' and had a long talk with the little bald-headed master of the house, who had assured the former that his Clara was deeply in love with Ambrose, and that he would like to see the two wedded soon.

"Ambrose," said Mr. Marlow, as the young man entered the library, where his guardian was seated, "have you considered that which I asked of you?"

"Yes, sir," replied Ambrose.

"And your decision?"

"As before, sir," respectfully answered the young man.

Mr. Marlow looked angry as he said, "You are bold, young fellow; you seem utterly regardless of your interests."

"On the contrary, sir," said Ambrose, "I so far regard my interests, that I fear to wed one whom I do not love, and who I can but think cares not for me."

"There you are mistaken. You have but to ask the hand of Clara Farman, and she is yours."

Ambrose shook his head doubtfully.

Mr. Marlow rose, and said, in harsher tones than the young fellow had ever heard him use before, "Well, go and do as many young men have done before you—become enamored with one who will not only wreck your happiness, but dishonor your name."

And he became pale and agitated, and sunk again into his seat.

"Sir, I am heartily sorry that this difficulty should have arisen between us," said Ambrose.

"You have been the kindest of fathers to me, and I owe you obedience and gratitude; but this is too great a sacrifice. Stay! I will travel—will visit different parts; and if at the end of a few months I return to you heart-whole, then shall you have your cherished wish. I will marry Clara Farman."

Mr. Marlow brightened, and grasping the young man's hand, said, "You are a good boy, Ambrose, and will never meet with one more beautiful and amiable than Clara Farman."

The Farmans had some friends staying at their house. They had come with the frost, anticipating several days' skating on the large pond, or ornamental waters, as Mr. Farman loved to call it, in a meadow at the back of the house.

The little gentleman had sent his coachman up to Mr. Marlow's house with a request that Ambrose would join the young people. Accordingly, with his skates swinging on his arm, Ambrose made his appearance at The Firs, the

name by which Mr. Farman's residence was known, and soon the little party, headed by Clara, made their way toward the "ornamental waters."

There were a young fellow, very fashionably attired, and who used an eye-glass, a young lady who everlastingly talked of her young gentleman abroad, and a young man clothed in large check, and who was very sparing with his h's.

This last-mentioned gentleman was Harry Jupp, the son of a former partner of Mr. Farman, and to whom the little gentleman was very partial.

"He's a useful member of society," he would say. "There's nothing like trade."

But he did not know that this young fellow was never in the trade, but spent most of his time at the races and music-halls.

"Hi say, Miss Farman, let's cart you round!" shouted Mr. Harry Jupp, seizing that young lady's arm.

Clara drew back with a little laugh, and said, "No, thank you, Mr. Jupp. I can cart myself round very well."

And she glided gracefully away, followed by the gaze of the young man with the eye-glass, who remarked to Harry, "Does not seem to care about your assistance, dear boy, eh?"

"Oh, that's nothing!" said Mr. Jupp. "But she's a fine girl, and it's no use, 'Erbert, your attempting to captivate 'er. The hi-glass is no good there. That's the man—that's 'im as is skating by her side over there."

He alluded to Ambrose, who was, as he had said, by the side of Clara.

The man she really loved was not present, and Ambrose being the best looking and most graceful skater of the party, she preferred his society to the others.

Clara Farman was a dreadful flirt, and to see the manner in which she smiled at her companion one would have thought that she looked on him as something more than a friend.

At all events, her father, who had just come up, wrapped in a rough coat, which gave him the appearance of a plump bear, remarked to Mr. Marlow, who was standing by, "You see, my boy, they've settled matters long ago, I'm sure of it. Ain't they a handsome couple, now?"

Then he complained of the cold, and looked round as if to see where a draught came from.

Ambrose, as he watched his fair companion, and listened to her musical laugh, thought he might do worse than wed her.

He had never until now remarked how beautiful she was.

"Are you very fond of skating?" Ambrose asked, as she skated by his side, with one little gloved hand resting on his arm?

"Yes—very!" she replied. "Are not you?"

"Tolerably. I shall take my skates with me when I go away."

Clara stopped, and, twisting round so as to face the speaker, elevated her eyebrows, and exclaimed, "Are you going away?"

"Yes; for a time," answered Ambrose.

"Are you sorry?"

"Of course I am!" laughed she, with a blush.

But this was not true. She was rather glad than otherwise; for, do all she would, she could not persuade the lover whom she met clandestinely that Ambrose was nothing to her.

"After all," thought Ambrose, "I might perhaps, as well stay at home, and try to love this beautiful girl; and really I think I should soon learn the lesson!"

At this moment Mr. Jupp came up, and said, "Hi say, Mr. 'Arford, come and help me to persuade Mr. Farman to try the ice! My governor says they used to skate together, and I should like to see the old boy cutting away now!"

"Papa skate!" laughed Clara. "Why, he could never move, wrapped up as he is!"

"We'll see!" cried Harry; and skated across

to where Mr. Farman was standing by his friend.

Clara followed, and exclaimed, "Come along, papa; you have got to skate!"

"Goodness me, child!" cried the old gentleman. "Me skate!" Then, turning to Mr. Marlow, "What do you think of that, Marlow? I think I'd better be off, or I shall be forcibly dragged on the ice?"

And, laughing heartily, he walked toward the house.

"It's no use, Miss Farman!" said Jupp, placing his hand on Clara's arm; "so let us have a turn together."

But Clara objected, and expressed her intention of removing her skates.

"Then let me take them off!" eagerly said he.

"If you choose!" smiled the girl, seating herself on one of the chairs which had been brought from the house.

Mr. Harry Jupp immediately flopped on his knees, and proceeded to unbuckle the straps.

The skates removed, he fastened them together, and, having taken off his own, slung them over one arm, and, bending low, offered the other to Clara, which she, with an amused smile, accepted; and Mr. Jupp marched off, casting a proud look toward the gentleman with the eye-glass, who had devoted himself to the other young lady, as if to say, "See, old boy, you're nowhere! You and your hi-glass ain't in it!"

That evening there was singing in the drawing-room of The Firs, and Ambrose became, if not in love with Clara, greatly charmed by her winning manner, and, when about to leave, asked her for a sprig of geranium which she wore in her dress.

"There are much better flowers in the conservatory," said Clara.

"Nay, but 'tis this particular flower I would have!"

She slowly drew it from the bosom of her dress, and held it toward him.

"I shall keep this in remembrance of you when I am away," said the young man, as he placed the sprig in his button-hole.

That night Ambrose informed his guardian that he intended to start on his pilgrimage the next day.

"And if, as I have said," he concluded, "I return heart-whole, will ask Miss Farman to be my wife."

"Well, go, my boy," kindly said Mr. Marlow; "and you will, I trust, return, and settle down a married man."

CHAPTER IV.

TIMELY SHELTER.

THE next morning, as he had said he would, Ambrose left his guardian's house at an early hour.

It was his intention to proceed first of all to a certain part of Hampshire, where a late college chum resided, in the hope that his friend would accompany him to Paris, at which city he intended to sojourn for a time.

But on arriving he found that the family had some time since disappeared, no one being able to tell him what had become of them.

"Hum!" muttered Ambrose, as he stood over his ankles in snow; "the best thing I can do is to find some place at which to take up my quarters for the night, and then start alone in the morning."

So accordingly he knocked at the door of a farm-house close by, and inquired of the woman who appeared if she could tell him where he might get a night's lodging.

"Well, I don't know of a place nearer than the 'Stag's Head,' about three miles or more from here."

"Whew!" whistled Ambrose. "That's pleasant; such a night too!"

And he looked across the country at the snow, which was now falling in large flakes.

"I can't accommodate you myself, sir," continued the woman, "for I've got a party as has been staying here some time."

There was nothing for it but to make his way through the snow to the "Stag's Head."

So burying his chin deep into his coat collar, and diving his hands into his coat pockets, Ambrose started forward.

The ground was rough, and every now and then he stumbled into a hollow, which was filled up with snow.

By the time he had walked about a mile night was coming on, and Ambrose began to feel rather uneasy as to the certainty of finding his way.

"Confound it!" he muttered. "Saunders having left this part makes it awkward for me. Suppose I get lost?—and I can see no signs of any habitation."

The road he was pursuing lay across a heath, with here and there bushes, which now looked like heaps of snow.

On one side was a wood, and on the other a high hedge which separated the heath and meadow.

Ambrose began to feel cold; his fingers were so benumbed that he could not light a cigar.

The snow fell faster and thicker, and the night grew darker.

But fortunately it is never very dark when the landscape is so covered, and the young man was enabled to see pretty well where he was going to.

After having walked, or rather stumbled, some distance further, he was rejoiced to see, at no great distance, the twinkling of a light.

"The 'Stag's Head,' I hope," he exclaimed, and quickened his pace in the direction of the light.

Upon nearing it, he was rather disappointed to find that it came from the window of a little cottage with lattice-work up the walls, and surrounded by evergreens, now almost completely hidden.

"Well, it is no use!" he grumbled. "Goodness only knows how much further is the 'Stag's Head,' so here goes to try their hospitality. My limbs are becoming numb and useless."

And he walked up to the door, and knocked loudly.

Footsteps were heard within, and in a moment the door opened, throwing a flood of bright light across the path, and on the young man, who looked like an animated snow-ball.

Ambrose saw a woman with a white shawl over her head.

"I beg your pardon," said he, his teeth chattering; "but I have, I believe, lost my way, and feeling dreadfully cold and hungry, have taken the liberty of seeking warmth and refreshment at this house."

The figure in the doorway moved as if about to go further into the house; and Ambrose, disappointed, said, "Well, perhaps, you will have the kindness to inform me how far it is to the 'Stag's Head.'"

At this moment a voice from within called, "Who's there, Winifred? Do not keep anybody standing outside on such a night as this!"

"Please to walk in, sir," said the female with the shawl over her head.

Ambrose shook himself, kicked the snow off his boots, then walked into the house, and soon found himself in a room comfortably furnished, with a blazing fire in the grate, by the side of which sat a man, who rose as Ambrose entered.

He was slimly built, of about middle age, with long hair and beard. His cheeks were pale, and his eyes, which were very large, were unnaturally bright. His dress consisted of a loose-fitting gray tweed suit.

"I am a stranger in these parts," began Ambrose by way of introducing himself. "I came down to see a friend named Saunders, only to discover that he had some time ago left the place."

"Yes," said the gentleman; "the Saunderses have, I believe, gone abroad."

"You knew them?"

"Slightly. But you are cold, and probably hungry. Remove your coat, and draw near the fire, and my daughter shall prepare supper."

"You are very kind," said Ambrose, and thought he had been very lucky in knocking at that door.

The gentleman of the house said, "And do you intend to stay in these parts long?"

"Oh, dear, no!" replied Ambrose, spreading his hands out before the fire. "My friend having left, there is nothing to induce me to stay."

At this moment a young girl, fair and lovely, entered the room.

"Can this be the figure with the shawl that opened the door to me?" thought the young man.

"My daughter," said the gentleman, inclining his head toward the girl.

Ambrose rose, and bowed low.

The young girl appeared slightly embarrassed as she returned his salutation, and proceeded to spread over the little round table a cloth, white as the snow outside.

The young man furtively watched her, and thought he had never before seen any one so lovely.

How glad he felt that he had not reached the "Stag's Head."

Then a woman of about fifty, rather stout, and with a good-natured countenance bordered by a huge frill, and attired in a very old-fashioned print dress, entered with a tray, on which was the supper.

As her eyes fell on Ambrose, her brow wrinkled, and she looked at the master of the house rather reproachfully.

This was Mrs. Croucher, an old and trusted servant.

Having placed the tray on the table, and looked alternately at the three, the woman retired.

After supper, during which Ambrose had great difficulty to keep his eyes from resting constantly on the young girl, he thought, however loth he might be, it was right that he should think of making his way toward the "Stag's Head."

"I am sorry we cannot keep you here, for it is a wretched night," said his host. "But the place is small, and we have no spare room."

Ambrose thanked him, and rising, donned his long coat, which Mrs. Croucher at that moment brought in, and announced his intention of departing.

"You have not given me your name," said the gentleman.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," hastily said Ambrose, and gave his card.

"Thank you," said his host, as he glanced at it.

"And my name is Cornelius Osmund. You will call and see us again before you quit this part of the country?"

"Many thanks, and I will," replied Ambrose; "and am grateful for your generous hospitality. Good-night!"

And having shaken hands with Mr. Osmund, he extended his palm to the daughter, who, half shyly, placed a little white hand in his, and said, "Good-night!"

Ambrose was soon stumbling through the snow in a pleasantly-confused state of mind.

How lovely was his late hostess!

"Call in again," he muttered. "Certainly I shall; and it will seem a lifetime before I again behold that charming creature. I don't believe in love at first sight; but, 'pon my word, my feelings are something akin to it."

Arriving at the "Stag's Head," a square brick building, with red, short curtains at the windows, and a swinging sign in front of it, which represented something very unlike a stag's head, Ambrose pushed open the door, and found himself in front of a small bar, behind which sat a stout, red-faced lady, who rose as the young man entered, and, with a gracious smile, stood awaiting his orders.

Ambrose said that he desired to stay there for the night, and added, as he thought of Winifred, "perhaps for several nights."

Mrs. Stubbs, the landlady, immediately called, in a shrill voice, "Sarah, Sarah, get the best bedroom ready for a gentleman," and

proceeded to supply the hot brandy and water which Ambrose had asked for.

It was seldom that visitors, except the usual customers who came nightly to drink in the parlor, were seen at the "Stag's Head," and Mrs. Stubbs decided, by the appearance of Ambrose; that he was a gentleman, and would pay well.

"It is fearful weather," said the young man, as he sipped his brandy; "I had hard work to reach here. In fact, I doubt whether at this moment I should not have been buried in the snow, if I had not been hospitably received by a gentleman and his daughter who reside in the cottage yonder;" and he waved his hand in the direction whence he had come.

"You mean Mr. Osmund, sir," said Mrs. Stubbs.

"Yes."

"Ah!" and the landlady shook her head and turned up her eyes. "Poor Miss Winifred is a dear creature!"

Ambrose in his mind quite agreed with her that Miss Winifred was a dear creature; but asked, in some surprise, "Why do you speak of Miss Osmund as 'poor'?"

Mrs. Stubbs screwed up her face, and beckoned mysteriously for Ambrose to come to her.

He did so, and she whispered, "They do say that her father is mad, and—"

Ambrose started back, and exclaimed, "Nonsense!"

"Ay; but you don't know him as we do, and no man in his right senses would go on as he does."

"How does he go on?" asked Ambrose.

"Well, he's a painter, you see, and sits and paints and paints from morning till night; and, indeed, sometimes all night. I don't understand it myself, but I've heard folks who do, say that he's working for the Academy, and then his fortune is made. But I've heard that ever since I came here, and that's nigh on fifteen years."

"An artist, who, like many others, is wearing himself out in seeking the fame that is never to be attained," thought Ambrose. Then he asked, "But what reason have you to suppose him mad?"

"Why, Mrs. Croucher, who lived servant with him for many a year, has a husband, and he comes in here and often tells of the strange doings of his wife's master. And poor Miss Winifred, they say, never goes out of the house from one month's end to another."

At this moment a long, thin man, with a shuffling gait, came from the parlor into the bar. He wore a very old black coat that reached past his knees, and long brown gaiters. On his head was a large billycock hat, with the brim turned down, which almost hid from view a face with twinkling blue eyes, and a large, good-natured looking mouth. In his hand he carried a brown jug, common in country taverns, which he placed on the bar with a request that it might be refilled.

"Once more before the old 'oman 'pears," he said; and, turning to Ambrose, and pulling the brim of his hat still lower over his face, "Your servant, sir."

"Very rough weather," said Ambrose, by way of acknowledging the man's salute.

"It be, master. But, lor' bless yer, I've known the time—let me see, it was last Christmas twelvemonth—no, it was further back than that—it was when my old master, as lived near the mill, was a-comin' from— Thankee," to the landlady, who at this moment handed him the jug replenished, and he walked back into the parlor.

Ambrose laughed, and said, "That's a strange fellow!"

"Yes; and a mighty trouble he gives his wife, who is the Mrs. Croucher as I was mentioning. He's never sober one day in his life!"

Sarah now looked into the bar, and announced the gentleman's room to be quite ready; and Ambrose was conducted thither, where a cheery fire was burning, and he soon went to bed, and dreamt of pretty girls and mad artists.

CHAPTER V.

IN THE WOOD.

MR. MARLOW and his friend Farman were seated together over a bottle of old port in the comfortable drawing-room of the former gentleman's residence.

"Yes," Mr. Farman was saying; "my little Clara is looking quite pale, and has lost her kittenish ways of late; and of course you, as well as I, understand the reason. We were young ourselves at one time, friend Marlow, my boy!"

And the little man playfully poked his friend in the ribs.

"You think," slowly said Marlow, "that 'tis the absence of my *protege* which causes your daughter to be so depressed?"

"That's just it, my boy!" replied Farman, dabbing a fat hand down on the table; "and the sooner the young fellow returns and makes her his wife the better. I hate a love-sick girl about the house!"

"Farman," said Marlow, leaning toward him, "you and I have been friends for many years. You consoled with me in my sorrow and—"

"And," interrupted Farman, somewhat excited, "you—you, my boy, have been a friend in a million to me! You—you, my boy, advanced me the means to retrieve my fortune when I was smashed utterly."

"Oh, do not speak of that," smiled his friend. "But what I was going to say was that, having ourselves been such fast friends, it would be a joy for us both to see our children united—for, indeed, I look upon Ambrose as my own son."

"Right, my boy!—right!" exclaimed Farman; "and that joy will be ours. My daughter loves the young fellow—that's quite clear."

"Ambrose, I believe, loves her," said Marlow, "without being altogether aware of it himself, "and fears to wed before being assured that he can give his whole heart to the woman he marries."

"Very right and proper!" said the little man. "But I thought it was all arranged between them?"

"No; Ambrose has gone away for a time, to return, I hope, and settle down with Clara as his wife."

"Right, my boy!" cried Farman, refilling the two glasses; "and here's long life and happiness to them both!"

While her father was talking thus to his friend, Clara was impatiently walking up and down the spot where she had last met Louis Blanford.

"Will he never come?" she murmured. "It is long past the hour, and I am cold!"

And she stamped her feet, and clapped her two hands together.

Her love for this handsome Louis Blanford was very great.

She had seen him first at Brighton, when at school there; had become at once infatuated with him, and had repeatedly stolen out to meet him.

Who he was she knew not; nor did she care so long as she felt certain that he loved her.

Louis Blanford was one of those men who live by their wits, a mere adventurer.

A gentleman in appearance and by education, he wormed himself into good society, wherever there were any games of chance going on, and, being an expert gambler, managed invariably to reap a good harvest.

Of this Clara knew nothing, and he had cunningly contrived to give her the impression that he was the son of a rich man, but that he himself would not yet come into his fortune.

Half an hour had passed, and still Clara was alone.

Her heart felt heavy, and she grew pale and irritable as she thought, "Perhaps he will never come again—cannot overcome his jealousy of Ambrose Harford!"

Twice did she start to leave the spot, but each time returned, something seeming to tell her that he would yet arrive.

And so he did, and as soon as the girl espied him she threw herself into his arms and sobbed.

"My poor darling," tenderly said Louis, "did you think I was not coming? I have been detained by important business."

That important business had been transacted within a gaming-house."

Then, drying her eyes, Clara said, "How foolish I am, Louis, but I love you so much!"

"I know you do, dearest," said Blanford, with a satisfied smile; "and soon you shall be my wife."

"It has seemed ages since last I saw you!" said the girl.

"Soon, darling," whispered he, there will be no parting between us!"

"I am so tired of my present existence, Louis," she murmured; "and I fear that Ambrose Harford will soon ask me to be his." Then, looking beseechingly at him, "Cannot you take me away? I do dread it so, and my parents are anxious that I should marry him."

Louis Blanford bit his lip, and frowned. He loved this foolish, trusting girl very much, better than he had ever before loved any one, but not so passionately that he would marry her unless sure that at the same time he wedded money.

"I cannot yet make you mine, dearest," he said. "I am poor, and shall be for some time to come. But—"

"Why am not I rich?" Clara cried. "If my father would but settle on me now the fortune he intends to give me on my wedding-day, it should be yours, Louis!"

Louis wished with all his heart that her father would do so.

"Yes," he said, half to himself; "if you were possessed of your fortune, our happiness need no longer be postponed. I have still some time to wait before I can conscientiously wed you."

Then he silently observed the girl who so passionately loved him.

Clara's brow was contracted, and she seemed to be thinking deeply.

"Is it not possible that your father may soon give to you the fortune which you have named?" presently asked Louis.

"Not until I have consented to be the wife of Ambrose Harford!" gloomily answered the girl.

Blanford's brow darkened as she spoke the name of his supposed rival, and he said, "You shall never be his!"

Then after moodily staring before him for a few moments, "Does he love you?"

"They tell me so," replied Clara.

"As I do?"—almost fiercely.

"N—no, Louis, I think not," replied Clara, eagerly; "I hope not."

"And you never have the slightest feeling akin to love for this Ambrose?" asked the young man.

"Never, Louis," replied Clara.

"And I may always trust you?—you will be true to me through all?" again asked he.

"Forever true!" said the girl.

Louis pressed her tenderly to him, and murmured, "My own Clara!"

Thus, in silence, stood the two for several minutes.

Louis was considering how he should ask the fair girl by his side to endeavor to obtain that fortune which he so longed to possess.

Clara's thoughts were also of that same money.

Oh, if she but had control over that which was intended for her, how readily would she become the wife of Louis, who she felt certain loved her for herself alone!

"Clara," presently spoke the young man, "if you were to consent to marry *him*,"—with a deep stress on the last word, and a flash of his dark eyes—"you might then ask for that which you desire."

Clara looked up somewhat surprised.

"Your fortune once settled on yourself," said he, "you might then refuse to marry this Ambrose Harford."

"Louis!" reproachfully cried Clara, shrinking from him.

This proposition seemed to the young girl very wrong, and for a moment she revolted at thought of such wickedness.

"You are offended," said Louis. And diving his hands into his pockets, and assuming a contrite air, "Oh, very well! I am very, very sorry, Clara! Then we must wait until my own fortune is within my reach, and respecting which, by the by, I shall be compelled to depart for Paris to-morrow!"

"No, no, Louis," earnestly cried Clara; "you must not go away! I am not offended—indeed, I am not; and will contrive to accomplish that which you have mentioned."

Blanford became radiant as he embraced the infatuated girl, and said, "My own love, all is fair in love and war, you know."

"But you must not go to Paris!"

"Indeed, I cannot help but go; but shall not be long away. How could I possibly remain long from you, Clara, my life?"

Soon after, they parted; he to leave by the midnight train for Paris, and she to hasten to her home, and brood over what her lover had said, and to lie awake half through the night, puzzling her brain as to how, without creating suspicion, she could broach the subject of her marriage portion to her father.

The next morning, as Mr. Farman was seated very close to the fire, with a red smoking-cap covering his bald pate, and a churchwarden pipe in his mouth, Clara approached him on tiptoe, and placing her little hands over his eyes, asked, "Who is it?"

The old gentleman placed his pipe on the table, and drew her down on her knees before him.

"Well, little puss," he said, playfully patting her cheek.

"Well, papa," said Clara.

Mr. Farman said, "You must not quite desert us, Clara, when you are Mrs.—"

The young girl sprung to her feet, and placing her hand over his mouth, thus prevented him from speaking the name which she had already heard too often.

"Well, I won't tease you, my dear," said the good old gentleman; "but you will certainly be such a couple that one doesn't meet within a day's march, eh?"

Clara looked cross, but after a moment forced a smile.

"And, between the two, a rich couple!" persisted her father.

He had broached the subject which she longed to hear.

"Mr. Harford is rich," she said, artlessly; "but—"

"And so is Miss Farman!" mimicked her father.

"Am I, papa?"—with an arch smile.

"To be sure! At least, you will be when you receive your wedding portion. Are you in a hurry for the matter to be settled, eh, puss?"

Clara was in a hurry that the money affair should be settled, as we know.

"And I am to have a handsome dowry?" she said.

"Yes; almost as handsome as yourself!" replied Mr. Farman, laughing heartily, supposing he had said something smart.

"And will it be mine? You know what I mean, papa—all my own?"—with a blush which she tried to hide by turning her head.

"What do you mean, child?" asked her father. "All your own, of course!"

"But it is not mine yet?"—falteringly.

"Ah, I see," smiled Mr. Farman; "the sooner this settlement and marriage is over the better, eh, puss?—is that what you would say?"

"The settlement, yes," thought Clara; "but the marriage, no."

Then placing one arm round her father's neck, she said, "Yes, papa; you may see about my—my dowry. I should so like to feel that I am a girl of means."

"All in good time—all in good time," said

the old gentleman. "We shall hear what Ambrose has to say when he returns."

And filling his pipe, he sat and smoked, thinking of how terrible would be the blow to his daughter should Ambrose not make her his wife.

"But," he said to himself, "the idea is absurd. Of course they were created for each other."

Clara left the apartment, an angry look on her beautiful countenance, and when in her own chamber cried with vexation.

"Bother Ambrose!" she said. "I hate his name; and I have failed to obtain my fortune. Oh, dear! Louis will think I have not made an attempt to bring about the settlement."

And she continued crying, and uttering angry words against her hard fate for some time.

CHAPTER VI.

TWO PROPOSALS.

AMBROSE rose the next morning feeling but little refreshed.

He had been restless and dreaming all night, and awoke with an acute headache.

Drawing the curtains back, he looked out of the window.

A great red sun was rising, and the snow, which lay thick on the ground, glistened like diamonds.

The trees appeared like huge pieces of white coral.

"Freezing hard," was his comment.

After breakfast, during which Mrs. Stubbs entertained him with stories of people in the neighborhood, but always ended by saying: "Leastways, so they say," he made his way to the artist's cottage.

For a moment he stood gazing on and admiring the picturesque place.

It was a one-story cottage, built of red brick, with green shutters and lattice-work, which in summer, when covered, as it was, with climbing plants, looked very pretty.

"And this cottage shelters the most beautiful girl I have ever seen," was the young fellow's thought, as he rapped at the door.

It was opened by Mrs. Croucher, who did not seem at all pleased on seeing the visitor.

"I was told to show you into the studio when you arrived," she said, grumpily, and holding the door wide open.

Ambrose walked in, and was conducted by her to a door, which she quietly opened, and motioning with her hand that he was to enter, disappeared.

The young man stepped within the apartment, and halted.

Mr. Osmund was seated at his easel, busily intent on a large oil painting.

He did not hear the young man enter, so absorbed was he in his work.

Ambrose watched with increasing interest the artist, as he proceeded with his picture, every touch producing fresh effect.

Ambrose was himself a very fair painter, and so looked on with pleasurable feelings.

The walls of the studio were covered with paintings of various subjects, among which was a life-like portrait of Winifred, and this the young man looked on long and attentively.

Mr. Osmund still worked, every now and again stopping in his labor to pass a white, thin hand wearily across his forehead, and then go on again.

Ambrose did not like to disturb him, and half made up his mind to retreat without making his presence known.

But another look at the beautiful face of Winifred, which seemed to smile at him from the canvas, and he decided that he could not leave without seeing the original of the portrait.

At this moment the artist rose, and, walking backward a pace or two, stood contemplating his work.

Ambrose then spoke his name.

Mr. Osmund started, and turned round with a blank look, and again passed his hand over his brow.

"Good morning, sir," he said. "I did not hear you enter. Be seated, pray."

"Thank you!" said Ambrose, as he took a seat opposite the unfinished picture. "I wish again to tender my thanks for your kindness of last night."

"Do not speak of it," said the artist, watching eagerly his visitor, whose looks were fixed on the half-completed painting.

"It is beautiful," murmured Ambrose.

The artist's eyes brightened as he said, "You like my picture?"

"It is superb—nature itself!" frankly exclaimed Ambrose.

"Still, it is not what I should wish it," said Mr. Osmund, with a sigh. "It is a subject I have worked at for years, and never but once have brought to that state of perfection at which I have so longed aimed."

"And that perfect picture?" asked Ambrose.

"Alas! by an accident, got destroyed. I had intended to send it to the Academy, had worked and dreamed over it—for I am certain to this day that it would have made me famous—but, as I have said, it was destroyed."

Ambrose expressed great sorrow, and was really touched by the manner of the disappointed artist.

"Tis really madness," he thought to himself; "and this man is working his life out for fame, which never arrives."

Mr. Osmund then again seated himself at his easel, and to Ambrose's question whether he did not disturb him, replied, "Oh, dear, no; you may stay, if you please!" and the next moment appeared quite lost in his occupation.

Ambrose was somewhat disappointed with his visit, but felt a great interest in the original of the portrait, which his eyes again sought.

He had come in the hope of seeing and speaking to the artist's daughter, and now she did not appear.

At this moment, the voice, which, although he had but once heard it, was well recognized, sounded without, and was followed by the deeper tones of a man.

Ambrose's heart gave a jump.

"Has she a lover?" he asked himself, and then felt amazed at his folly.

What could it matter to him?

He was about to inform Mr. Osmund of his intention to depart, when the door of the studio was opened, and Winifred entered, followed by a young man of showy appearance.

The girl bowed to Ambrose, who offered his hand, which was shyly taken.

The young man looked hard at him, and Ambrose returned the look, the former's brow contracting into a scowl.

Mr. Osmund turned his head, and then, rising, cordially welcomed the new-comer, whom he addressed as Mr. Cavendish.

"I have another commission for you, Mr. Osmund," said Cavendish.

"You are kind," replied the artist, and glanced at his daughter, as if to say, "We wish to be alone."

Ambrose also noticed this, and said, "I will now bid you good-by, sir, but hope again to have the pleasure of seeing you."

Mr. Osmund hoped so too; and Ambrose with a bow, which was coldly returned, to the stranger, quitted the studio with Winifred, followed by the gaze of Cavendish, who appeared displeased with the arrangement.

The young man stood in the passage, hat in hand.

Was he now to bid good-by, to the fair girl before him, and depart from the place?

"Your father is very clever," he said, to break the silence.

"Yes," sadly replied the young girl; "but his ambition to do great things has stood in the way of more practical ones."

"He is painting for the Academy, is he not?"

"Yes," answered Winifred, with a weary smile; "for years has he labored for that end, and is now as far as ever from reaching it."

"Why, how is that?" asked Ambrose, somewhat astonished. "Your father is a genius. Why is it, then, that such a man cannot find a place in the exhibition?"

"You are a stranger to me, Mr. Harford, and perhaps I should not talk so much to you. But I will tell you the reason of that which must, indeed, surprise you," said Winifred.

Ambrose hoped it would be a long story; the girl's voice was the sweetest music to him.

"My father, as undoubtedly you have perceived, is in delicate health, and indeed at times his head is so confused that he knows not what he is doing. I attribute it to overwork, for, from my earliest recollection, he has labored unceasingly."

"But the Academy?" began Ambrose.

"I was about to tell you. Some years ago my father painted a grand picture; it was pronounced glorious, and critics said it would make him famous. But, by some unaccountable means, the picture, which was to realize all his hopes, was destroyed. It was discovered hanging in strips from the frame."

"And you knew not who committed that shameful act?" asked Ambrose.

"No. But I have often thought that it was done by my father's own hand."

"Impossible!" exclaimed her listener.

"For months after the occurrence he was completely mad. Then he slowly recovered, and commenced to paint again the subject which had been destroyed. But it is never finished. After working at it for some considerable time, he invariably discards it, deeming it far inferior to the one that he has lost."

Both stood silent for some time; then Ambrose, taking the girl's hand, said, "And your life cannot be of the brightest; do you not often sigh for change of scene, for—"

"Hush!" said Winifred. "I am content to stay with, and do all in my power to comfort and cheer, my poor father."

And a tear slowly rolled from under the long lashes.

Ambrose was affected; he felt that he could love this noble-minded girl, so different to the one whom his guardian would have him marry.

Mrs. Croucher here made her appearance, and casting an angry look at Ambrose, said, "Miss Winifred, Mr. Cavendish is waiting to speak to you."

Again Ambrose experienced a sharp pang at his heart, and bidding farewell to Winifred, left the house, followed by the stony glare of Mrs. Croucher, who stood by the door like a sentinel.

"I wonder you waste your time on a strange person, miss," she said, as the door closed on the young fellow. "You don't know who he is."

"That he is a gentleman, I feel certain," retorted Winifred, smiling; "but I am not insensible to your kind care of me, Mrs. Croucher."

And she made her way to a room adjoining the studio, where Mr. Arthur Cavendish was standing on the hearth-rug.

Mrs. Croucher proceeded with her domestic duties, muttering, "A parcel of idle fellows, that have more money than sense, hanging about a place because it contains a pretty girl! But I'll see after Miss Winifred, and I do hope she will some day marry Mr. Cavendish, who is, I'm certain, doting fond of her." Then, with a deep-drawn sigh, "But it is a sad pity that such a nice creature should ever be married at all, for you never know what a man may turn out. Just look at mine!"

And, as she reflected on the altered habits of her inebriate spouse, she became excited, and brushed away at the fire-grate viciously.

As Winifred entered the apartment, Mr. Cavendish stepped from the hearth-rug, and, taking her hand, said, "Miss Osmund, you appear to have become greatly interested in that strange gentleman."

"How do you know that he is a stranger?" asked Winifred, in a tone which showed some annoyance.

"Your father has informed me of how he introduced himself here, and I have no doubt solely with the view of making your acquaintance."

Winifred blushed scarlet, and secretly wished that it had been so, for she liked the handsome Ambrose.

"Indeed, Mr. Cavendish, you speak in a strange manner," she said to this.

"You may think so. But, Miss Osmund—Winifred—you may, perhaps, understand my feelings when I see you pleased with the society of this man, when I say that I love you." And clasping both her hands, "Yes, passionately, wildly, and feel that I could crush whoever should interfere between me and my love!"

"Please release my hands!" said the girl, in half-frightened tones.

"When you have answered me," replied he, quickly. "I ask you to be my wife. Your father would sanction our union. Can you love me? Speak, Winifred; say—"

He stopped on perceiving that the young girl had burst into tears.

She had for some time feared this avowal, and dreaded it; for she could not, do as she would, dispel a dislike she had taken to this man from the first time of meeting him.

"Is my proposal so very dreadful?" he asked.

"Oh, please do not speak of it!" she cried. "I am so sorry you have spoken thus! You are kind, very kind, both to my father and myself; but I can never be your wife—never!"

"There is some one else whom you love?" he cried, roughly, his brow darkening.

"No," spoke Winifred.

"Then why refuse one who dotes on you, who has done so much for your father, and who could and would do much more?"

He alluded to the many orders for pictures which he had from time to time obtained for the artist; and this allusion, instead of serving, as Mr. Cavendish supposed it might, to improve his cause, did but increase the dislike she had already entertained for him.

Cavendish was attentively regarding her, expecting that she would utter a more favorable reply to his proposal.

But Winifred remained silent.

"You do not mean what you have said?" spoke he, his arm stealing round her waist.

She disengaged herself, and said, "My answer is final. Do not broach the subject again, please."

Cavendish was now struggling hard to keep his temper.

His brow was contracted, and his hands caught nervously at his clothing.

"Then you reject me?" he said, slowly, and in a very low voice. "Until now you have given me every reason to think that I did not love in vain. But mind"—clutching her arm—"such devotion as I feel for you is not to be so easily cast aside; and whether it be he who was here some time since, or any one else, let him beware how he crosses my path!" And, clapping his hat on his head, he hurried from the house.

Winifred sunk into a chair before the fire, and gave vent to her feelings in a flood of tears.

Why had he spoken of love to her, and how had she offended him?

For her father's sake she would rather not have done that, for it was Mr. Cavendish who supplied the artist almost wholly with the means of existence.

CHAPTER VII.

WILL YOU BID ME STAY?

AMBROSE HARFORD stayed on at the "Stag's Head."

He had told Mrs. Stubbs that the place interested him, and he should remain awhile.

"I'm sure I'm very pleased, sir," was her comment; and hoped within her own mind that

he would abide beneath her roof for a long time, for he was the most generous lodger that had ever visited her inn.

He called at the cottage every day, and was rejoiced to remark the color on Winifred's cheeks whenever he made his appearance.

He was forced to admit to himself that if he did not already love the artist's beautiful daughter, he soon would do so.

"My guardian's plans for my future are completely quashed now," he thought. "Would it not be better that I should fly from this charming creature, and so escape further danger? But that I cannot do. I must remain, whatever comes of it. But, after all, may not she already have a lover? Ah, he, perhaps, who looked so sternly at me in the studio; and if it be indeed so—"

He could not finish the sentence, and sharp was the jealous pang that shot through his breast.

After a while he resumed: "It is madness. Even though I could win the love of that dear girl, I could never dare to marry her; therefore, it would be wickedness to woo her." After another long silence, he proceeded: "I love her; I feel it, and should be a worthless wretch indeed could I not by some means support myself without my guardian's aid. Bah! what am I saying? Is it likely that Winifred cares for me, a stranger; if, indeed, she be not about to wed that other man?"

Ambrose often saw and conversed with Jack Croucher, Mrs. Croucher's inebriate husband, who appeared to have taken a great liking to the young man—perhaps for the many drops which he imbibed at Ambrose's expense.

Jack lived in a very small cottage, or, rather, hut, not far from the "Stag's Head."

He depended for a livelihood on a square, rickety cart, drawn by a long-legged, shaggy horse.

Himself and the above-mentioned horse and vehicle he let out for the purpose of carting, and a more curious picture than Jack, with his long body almost double, perched on the patched cart, urging his old ragged pony on, could not well be imagined.

He had, at one time, been a farmer; but bad seasons and hard drinking had brought him to the plight in which we now find him.

His wife, really a good-hearted woman, heeded not his poverty, but his intemperate habits she would not tolerate; and so left him and returned to live at the artist's where she had been a faithful servant in Mr. Osmund's more prosperous days, and where Jack had wooed and won her.

Ambrose was leaning against the window-sill in the parlor of the "Stag's Head," gazing thoughtfully over the snow-covered landscape.

He was trying hard to make up his mind whether to return to his home or go on to Paris.

He was thinking so deeply, that he did not notice a rickety cart, drawn by a horse with a shaggy coat, stop in front of the inn, and from which vehicle Jack Croucher descended.

Presently he was recalled to himself by the door opening, and then he saw the tall, ungainly form of Jack.

"I beg pardon, sir!" said Jack, and stopped in the doorway.

"Come in, Croucher," cried the young man; "this is a public room, you know."

Jack walked up to the fireplace, and, removing a very large and ragged pair of gloves, held his hands before the fire.

"It's mighty cold, sir—nigh as sharp as the time as Ben Wiggles had the mill-wheel friz fast. Let me see; it was the year afore Mike Maloney 'listed, 'cause his gal jilted him. No; it was—"

How long he would have rambled on in this manner we know not, had not Ambrose invited him to take a drink.

"And be you going to stay here long, sir?" asked Jack.

"Well, I have hardly made up my mind," was the reply, as his looks wandered in the direction of the artist's cottage.

Jack had guessed why the young gentleman so lingered at Greenford; and, although not surprised that Ambrose had fallen in love with Winifred, shook his head, and thought to himself that it was a bad job.

At this moment Arthur Cavendish passed the house at no great distance from it.

Croucher saw him, and said, "Ah, it's a pity to see a dear young creature like Miss Osmund so taken up with he—a very great pity!" And Jack shook his head.

On looking from the window, Ambrose perceived the individual to whom Jack was alluding, and agreed within himself that it was a pity, but he spoke not.

"My old 'oman has taken to him, too," Jack went on. "But, mark me! she'll rue it. He isn't the sort of man for Miss Osmund. I don't like him."

Ambrose was becoming interested, and wished to hear more concerning this lover of Winifred's.

"Who is he?" he asked.

"Why, he lives at the big house t'other side of the hill yonder. He's a rum chap, and ugly things have been said about him; but whether it's truth, of course I can't say."

"And is he going to marry Miss Osmund?" asked Ambrose, with an effort.

"I 'ears so, sir—leastways, he's mad after her, and anybody would think as she was the same about him; but, 'tween you and me,"—here Jack bent his long body forward—"she ain't in love with him—no, she ain't."

Ambrose was glad to hear that.

"But," continued Croucher, "he somehow pays her father big sums for his pictures. I s'pose they are worth it; don't know much about it myself, and my old 'oman, as lives at the cottage, thinks it would be doing a good turn for Miss Osmund if she got her married to Mr. Cavendish."

"Ah!" thought Ambrose; "that accounts for the impolite manner in which I am received by her."

"But," said Jack, again speaking mysteriously, "be on your guard, sir. Mind what you're at with that man Cavendish. He's a fierce 'un, I know, and I don't like him. There!"

And Jack threw himself back in his seat.

After having swallowed several more drinks, Croucher climbed into his little cart; and, striking the pony with his old whip-handle, drove away.

Ambrose thought of what he had heard. Could it be that the artist's daughter was about to marry Cavendish?

Well, and what if it were so? What could it matter to him?

"But it would matter, though," the young man muttered. "I shall find no rest till I know the truth of what Jack has told me." Then, bitterly, "And shall I find rest then?"

He had been at Greenford a month, and had nearly every day seen Winifred, had confessed to himself that he loved her, and decided to ask her to become his wife, and brave his guardian's displeasure.

So, accordingly, one morning, he made his way to the cottage; and, having conversed for some time with the artist, left him, and joined Winifred in the little parlor.

"Miss Osmund," he began, "am I to bid you good-by?"

"Bid me good-by, Mr. Harford?" repeated the girl, looking perplexed. "If you are going away, certainly."

And Ambrose fancied her voice slightly trembled.

"Shall I go?" asked he.

Winifred became confused, but made no reply.

"Would you miss me?" he eagerly asked, taking her unresisting hand.

"Oh, yes; very much!" truthfully replied the young girl; and then blushed rosy-red, and drew her hand away.

"Winifred," passionately cried Ambrose, "will you bid me stay? Tell me, dearest; for I love you! Will you be my wife?"

Winifred appeared greatly confused, and a

little surprised; but neither offended nor frightened at this avowal.

Then followed a scene which all lovers are acquainted with.

Ambrose was supremely happy; the girl to whom he had so readily given his heart returned his affection.

What more could he desire?

But when alone at the inn, he thought there was much more to desire—a means of maintaining himself and the girl he so loved.

"My guardian will forever discard me, of course," he muttered. "And I must work for her. The labor will be sweet; what would I not do for her sake?"

Next day, as usual, he called at the cottage, and was soon seated by the side of Winifred on a couch in the parlor.

"And now, darling," he said, "I must shortly leave you for a time."

He intended returning to his guardian, to inform him of his newly-found love.

"You will be true to me?" he said.

"Forever!" replied the girl.

"And you trust me?"

For reply, she burst into tears.

"Why do you weep, dearest?" asked Ambrose, in a concerned tone.

"Oh, Ambrose," she sobbed, "I am foolish; but I feel so depressed at thought of your leaving me!"

"Brief will be my absence from you, and I shall return to make you all my own."

Neither of them saw the countenance of a man, hideous in its expression, peering from the studio, the door of which was but partly closed.

As soon as Ambrose and Winifred had quitted the apartment, Mr. Cavendish came from the studio, closing the door after him, and not disturbing the artist, who was bending over his easel.

He stood on the hearth-rug, with his hands behind him, and waited the return of Winifred, who presently came back, and gave a little cry of surprise on beholding Cavendish.

For a moment she stood as if undecided whether to remain or not, when Cavendish settled the question by advancing to her, and clutching her arm. "Winifred!" he said. "Then 'tis for him that you cast me off! False girl!" thrusting her from him; and, in a sneering tone—"You loved no other!"

Winifred, trembling violently, said, "Mr. Cavendish, how dare you?"

"How dare I?—what would I not dare? Do I not love you?" bringing his face down on a level with hers. "And you shall never be his. Bid him depart, if you care for his safety!"

That said, he hastily quitted the room and the house.

Winifred was much frightened.

What did he mean? Would he, in his jealousy, do aught to harm her lover?

Then flashed through her mind the suspicion that had been cast on Cavendish some time ago, when a man had been found, near his house, shot through the heart. For a moment she thought of confiding in her father, but dismissed the idea as quickly as it had arisen.

She could not venture to tax a mind already too greatly troubled.

When Ambrose called next day, he was surprised to find Winifred looking pale and downcast.

"Oh, Ambrose," she cried, "I am wretched at the thought of your departure, but yet bid you speed away. Remain not a moment longer in Greenford!"

Ambrose was astounded. "What mean you?" he inquired.

"Oh, do not ask me!" exclaimed Winifred, "but go!"

"You no longer love me?"

"I love you dearly, Ambrose; but, for your own sake, 'tis best that for the present we part."

"And you will not explain?"

"I cannot!—I cannot!" and she clung to him, trembling and sobbing.

"What mystery is this, dearest girl?" plead-

ed the young man. May I not return soon to claim you for my own?"

"Yes, yes; but go now; and my heart goes with you!"

"I will return in two weeks from this day," began Ambrose.

"No, no; not so soon! I—"

"In a month?"—fairly astounded.

"Yes, yes; but go now, I implore you!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A WARNING.

AMBROSE returned to the "Stag's Head," confused and dazed.

What did it mean? Why was he to remain away a month?—and why had Winifred been so agitated?

After some consideration, he concluded that he would wait until the following day before starting for home.

"I shall then, perhaps, be in a less troubled state of mind, and better able to go through the ordeal of informing my guardian that his cherished wish can never be realized," he thought.

So, accordingly, the next day he stated his intention of leaving to Mrs. Stubbs, who was extremely sorry, and hoped the gentleman would honor the "Stag's Head" next time he came to Greenford.

Jack Croucher was also very sorry, and, nodding his head mysteriously, said, "Sir, a word with you afore you go," and left the house.

Ambrose, with his portmanteau in his hand, followed, about to proceed to the railway station.

"I'll go a little way with you, sir," said Jack; and they walked along side by side over the frozen snow.

"Excuse me, master," began Croucher; "but ain't you got an eye to the cottage yonder?" And he nodded toward the artist's dwelling, which they were nearing. "You see, I learn what's going on there through my old 'oman, and although she won't never tell me nothing when I asks her, she generally lets out the secrets when she's a-bullying me. You see," Jack went on, "my old 'oman is very anxious that Miss Osmund should marry Mr. Cavendish. Now, you'll excuse me, sir—ain't you in love with her yourself? Yes, I know you are, sir; and there's nothing to blush at, neither. Now, I have taken a fancy to you, master, and will look after your interests while you're away. Do you believe in me?"

Ambrose felt that he could trust this good-natured though inebriate fellow, and fearing more than ever now that there was some serious mystery at the artist's cottage, was glad that there would be some one to watch over his love in his absence.

Seizing Jack's hand, he exclaimed, "I do believe in you; and when I return, in a month from now—"

"You return in a month?" said Croucher.

"Yes, positively."

"Hum!" grunted Jack. "All right, sir; you look to old Jack Croucher."

And warmly shaking the young man's hand, he returned to the "Stag's Head," to spend the coin which Ambrose had left in his palm.

Harford went on to the railway station, and in due course arrived at his guardian's residence.

Mr. Marlow received him joyously, now full of hope that his cherished wish would be gratified.

Ambrose had been home several days, and having made no allusion to Miss Farman, his guardian thought it time that he should speak concerning her, and so said to Ambrose: "Come, my boy, 'tis time that you paid a visit to your future bride."

"My future bride?" confusedly stammered Ambrose.

"Yes," said Mr. Marlow, observing him, and growing uneasy. "Of course you have returned prepared to address Clara?"

"Less than ever now, sir, can I consent to do that!" said Ambrose.

"You refuse to marry her?"
 "Impossible that she should ever become my wife!"

"You dare to tell me that?"
 "I said, sir," cried Ambrose, "that if I returned heart-whole I would do as you desired."

"Do you mean to say that you have formed an attachment elsewhere?" raved Mr. Marlow. "Then I forever discard you! You are no longer my heir!"

"I was prepared for that, sir," said Ambrose, "and accept my fate. But if you were to see her—"

"Say no more!" interrupted Mr. Marlow. "You had best consider in what way you may provide for yourself and the woman for whom you are about to immolate your whole life!"

And he dashed out of the room.

"I do not care!" exclaimed Ambrose, warmly. "I will by my own exertions make a home for my beloved one! Rather would I dwell in the poorest abode with Winifred than revel in luxury with a woman for whom I had no affection!"

When Marlow informed Clara's father of Ambrose's decision, the little man was quite horrified.

He groaned aloud, and said, "And Clara has looked pale and ill ever since he has been away! The poor girl will die—I know she will!"

We know that Clara's pale looks were not attributable in any way to Ambrose; she was, in reality, indebted for them to Louis Blanford, from whom she had heard nothing since his departure for Paris.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DISCOMFITED RIVAL.

AMBROSE was gone.

Winifred repeated this to herself over and over again.

The place seemed colder and more dreary now than ever.

Never having left her father from childhood, and never having seen anybody save the inhabitants and an occasional visitor to Greenford, Ambrose, with his handsome person and gentlemanly manners, had taken her simple heart by storm.

And he was gone.

Her life was now most utterly forlorn, and yet she trembled as she thought of his return to her.

About this time Mr. Osmund fell ill—so ill that his cherished picture could not be proceeded with; and all Winifred's time was taken up in waiting on him.

Mrs. Croucher was very anxious, and one morning said to her young mistress, "Miss Winifred, your father is, I fear, very ill indeed—seems to be completely broken up; and—you will excuse the liberty of an old servant—I should like to see you married and settled, my dear."

"Married!" repeated Winifred.

"You understand me, miss?" said Mrs. Croucher. "Of course you know that Mr. Cavendish—"

"Mrs. Croucher," angrily said Winifred, "I do not wish to hear aught of him!"—and proceeded to her father's bedside.

"Poor young thing!" soliloquized the woman. "She thinks that stranger will come back again! Ah, me! the way we poor woman are deceived!"

One day, when Winifred was in the parlor, very unhappy in consequence of her father's illness, Mr. Arthur Cavendish came in, and attributing her melancholy expression to the loss of her lover, felt greatly annoyed, and glared savagely.

"Do you wish to see my father?" timidly asked Winifred.

"No," replied he; "'tis for you that I am here. That fellow is gone, never to return, of course; and again I ask you to be mine. Winifred, I swear you shall never be his!"

And his voice becoming hoarse, and his features working spasmodically, he whispered, "I would *kill* him first?"

Winifred drew back in affright.

Cavendish followed her up, and repeated, through his closed teeth, "Kill him!—yes, if ever he crosses my path again. So surely as he gains your hand, so surely shall he die! You shall be watched, rest assured of that."

Winifred, who had been striving to control her feelings, now uttered a scream.

"Hush!" growled the man, clutching her arm.

The girl attempted to break from him, and, after a struggle, succeeding, crouched in a corner, and Cavendish stood looking down upon her.

At this moment the door opened, and Mr. Osmund, in his dressing-gown, and looking pale and haggard, appeared.

"What is this?" he demanded, in a hollow voice.

Cavendish shrunk back abashed; and Winifred sprung toward her father, and embracing him, said, "Nothing, dear father—nothing!" and led him back to his chamber.

The young girl feared to tell him anything.

Arthur Cavendish, before quitting the cottage, had a talk with Mrs. Croucher, and left the house at last in apparently very good spirits.

The artist grew worse, and Jack Croucher, in his little rickety cart, was sent for the doctor, who, on arriving, declared the patient to be dangerously ill, and not likely to recover, mind and body both being shattered.

Winifred was inconsolable. Day and night she watched by the bedside of her beloved father, until, to her joy, he seemed to grow better.

Mr. Cavendish still continued his visits, and provided well for the artist; but Winifred would have forbidden him the house but for the sake of her father, whom she feared to worry.

Mrs. Croucher received Cavendish very graciously, and did her best to persuade her young mistress "that he was an exceedingly nice gentleman."

But Winifred had told the good woman nothing of the exceedingly nice gentleman's behavior.

Every day he was at the cottage, begging and threatening to gain his end, and always received the same negative answer.

Winifred longed for, yet feared, the time to arrive when Ambrose would again be near her.

And as the days grew into weeks, she became terrified at the thought that her lover would soon appear; for she knew Cavendish was still in the same mind.

One evening, as she was seated in the parlor listening intently for any sound from her father's room, she was suddenly startled by a knock, which she knew well, at the outer door.

With a beating heart, she went into the passage, and the next moment was clasped in her lover's arms.

"My darling," cried Ambrose, "I have much to tell you."

"Hush!" whispered Winifred, raising her finger; and as she led the way into the room, "my father is ill—has been very ill."

Ambrose expressed great sorrow at this.

Winifred was pale and trembling, ever and anon glancing fearfully toward the window.

Ambrose noticed this, and said, "Winifred, dearest, you are not looking well. Your father's illness has overtaken your strength;" and was about to embrace her.

But she drew away from him, and with a startled look, cried, "No, no!—never more!"

"What means this?" asked the young man. "Speak, Winifred! Have you already ceased to love me?"

The girl, struggling to disguise her emotion, said, in low tones, "Leave me. I grieve—Heaven only knows how much—for the sorrow I shall have caused you, but I can never be yours."

Then she broke down, and dropping into a seat, sobbed quietly.

"Winifred, for Heaven's sake be more explicit!" cried Ambrose, going down on one knee before her. "Think before you cast from you such devotion as mine! Say you do not mean what you have spoken!"

And he clasped her hands in agony and expectation.

"No, no!" cried Winifred, rising and brushing away her tears. "Leave me—not for my sake, but for your own—and never more seek one who has caused you so to suffer!"

"You no longer love me!" said Ambrose. "Ah! false as you are fair!"

"No, no!—not false!" cried Winifred.

"Then why act thus strangely?"

Winifred fearfully glanced toward the window, through which she had seen Cavendish watching her every movement.

"Then you refuse to explain?" said Ambrose.

"Oh, do not torture me, but depart, and forget me! I can never be yours!"

Ambrose became angry, and said, "I will go. Farewell, false girl!—farewell!" And, taking his hat, he stood for a moment, looking sternly at her. Then his expression softened and, extending his arms, he cried, "Winifred, you cannot mean what you have said—would not so heartlessly doom me to life-long misery?"

The girl averted her head, to hide from him her emotion, but spoke not.

The young man's hands dropped listlessly to his side; and with a sigh, that was almost a groan, he walked backward from the room, his eyes fixed on her whom he believed most utterly false.

Then he turned, and hastily left the house; and, in a dazed state of mind, hurried from the spot.

Winifred sunk to the floor, and cried, in agony, "Oh, my love! how terrible the sacrifice I make to save you!"

Ambrose had walked some distance, when he stumbled and fell over what appeared to be a heap of snow.

Rising, he discovered the object he had fallen over to be a man, and, upon examination, that man proved to be Mr. Arthur Cavendish, who now attempted to gain his feet.

With Harford's assistance he did so; and, without a word of any sort, limped away.

While Cavendish had been outside the cottage, peering through the window, Jack Croucher had come along in a half-tipsy condition, and having himself looked through the window, and seen Ambrose and Winifred, exclaimed, "Darned sneak!"

And, catching Mr. Arthur Cavendish round the waist, carried him some distance, and hurled him into the deep snow.

That was how the gentleman came where Ambrose had found him.

Harford also went his way, and arrived at his guardian's house, hardly knowing in his bewildered state how he had managed to reach it.

Then he became angry at Winifred's supposed faithlessness, and vowed never again to have faith in any girl. All women should henceforth be alike to him; and he might as well now wed with Clara Farman, and so satisfy his guardian.

"Of course," he soliloquized, "'tis the fellow whom I stumbled over that she loves! Fool, idiot that I have been, to allow myself to be so duped and cheated!"

He had left his guardian's residence stating that it was his intention to see the lady of his love; and if when he had told her that he had but his own exertions to depend on she would marry him, he would, as soon as possible, make her his wife.

Mr. Marlow had sullenly listened to this, but said nothing, and so Ambrose had departed.

Now, on entering the drawing-room one morning, and finding his *protege* seated there, Mr. Marlow exhibited some surprise, and asked the meaning of the young man's return.

"Do not question me, sir," replied Ambrose;

"but be satisfied that if Miss Farman, as you have said, will accept me, I am willing to make her my wife!"

Mr. Marlow's face brightened, and he thought to himself, "Ah, I see; he has lost his desire for love in a cottage, with hard work and scanty fare!"

And asked no questions.

Ambrose visited the Farmans, and soon he and Clara were engaged to each other.

They were very cold lovers.

We know that Ambrose cared not for Clara, and she had consented to marry him only because piqued at Louis Blanford's non-appearance, and her conviction that he had altogether abandoned her because of his belief that she would be unable to secure the fortune that he coveted.

Mr. Farman was in high glee, and his wife was equally satisfied with the proposed marriage.

So all parties appeared content.

The wedding was to take place in the spring, and the date fixed for the event arriving, Ambrose and Clara became man and wife.

CHAPTER X.

A WOMAN WHO CHANGES HER MIND.

WINIFRED'S life appeared a blank; the loss of that brief happiness which had entered it, rendered her existence, now that it had fled, almost unendurable.

Winter had gone, and spring with all its glory had come; but the girl heeded not its beauty; her heart was alive to sorrow only.

Her father had become worse again, and it was impossible that he should last much longer.

Whether the loss of her lover or the threatened deprivation of her father was most terrible, it would be difficult to say.

Mrs. Croucher now saw the great trouble coming upon her young mistress, and more frequently than ever before urged her to marry Arthur Cavendish.

But Winifred said she would rather perish with her father, but mentioned not the fact of Ambrose having asked her to be his wife, nor for what reason she had refused him.

At last the dreaded time arrived.

Winifred was alone with her father.

"My child," he said, faintly, "I am dying—I know it!"

The young girl buried her face in the bed-clothes, and shook convulsively.

"You need have no fear for your future," brokenly continued the artist. And with difficulty placing his hand under his pillow, he drew forth a sealed packet, which he placed in Winifred's hand, saying, "Open it when I am gone!"

At this moment Mrs. Croucher and the doctor came in, and at that same instant the poor half-mad artist ceased to exist.

Winifred was carried fainting from the room. Father, lover, both gone, cause indeed for grief had the unhappy girl.

The funeral over, she refused to see Cavendish, who repeatedly called.

The sealed packet which her father had placed in her hand had been found by Mrs. Croucher, where it had fallen from Winifred's powerless hand, and placed on a shelf in the little parlor; the young girl in her great grief, having entirely forgotten its existence.

One day, when seated in her father's studio, her eyes fixed on the half-finished painting at which he had labored so unceasingly, the door slowly opened, and Arthur Cavendish quietly entered the room.

Winifred rose and said, "Mr. Cavendish, why this intrusion? Rest satisfied with the knowledge that I shall never become the wife of him whom you have compelled me to banish from my sight, but can never drive from my heart."

"No," replied he; "I would claim you for my own. Nay, you must not go, as Winifred attempted to pass him. 'Why will you persist in refusing to become mine? You are now alone in the world. Be my wife, and every happiness shall be yours.'"

"Wed you—you who by brutal threats have compelled me to banish the man I love? No, never, never!"

And so saying, Winifred dashed past him, and hurried from the room.

Cavendish, uttering an oath, strode from the studio into the parlor.

His looks wandered round the apartment, and fell on the sealed packet.

He took it from the shelf, and turning it over in both hands, muttered, "This, then, is the packet which her father gave her," and put it in his pocket.

"She knew not I was so near," he muttered. "Ah, when a man loves as fiercely as I do, he seizes every opportunity of gaining his end. This packet may, in some way, assist me to win the girl."

Making his way to his home, an old house fast falling to decay, and with but one wing of the building thoroughly habitable, he proceeded to examine the contents of the packet of which he had so unscrupulously possessed himself; and having done so, was more than ever anxious to secure Winifred for his bride.

Arthur Cavendish was the son of a man who had lived "fast," and run through a handsome fortune, so that at his death Arthur inherited but the ruined house we have mentioned, and an amount of money which, at the rate at which he had been living, would soon be exhausted.

He was of a very passionate nature, loved deeply and hated fiercely.

Wroth indeed was he with Ambrose Harford for coming in his way, and determined that he would hesitate at nothing to be revenged on him.

He became reckless, and often now presented himself at the cottage in a half-drunken condition.

Mrs. Croucher now changed her opinion of him, and on one occasion had fairly thrust him from the premises.

"You don't come here," she exclaimed. "We've seen enough of you now. I have had experience in this sort of thing, but Miss Winifred hasn't, and doesn't want it."

Cavendish kept away after this, and Winifred felt greatly relieved.

The young girl's grief having moderated, she began to think of the future.

Her father had died poor, and she must work now for her livelihood.

Mrs. Croucher, too, saw the necessity of seeking a home elsewhere.

Before long, Winifred had, through the interest of a picture dealer with whom Mr. Osmund had done business, obtained a situation in the establishment of a West-End photographer, where she soon became of great value to them, being, as she was, gifted with considerable skill.

Mrs. Croucher made it up with Jack, who promised to be temperate, and the two were living at present in the little domicile very happily.

CHAPTER XI.

MET AGAIN.

AMBROSE tried hard to forget Winifred. He felt how wrong he had acted in marrying one woman while his heart was still devoted to another.

He did his best to banish from his thoughts the girl, whose seeming falsehood had so amazed and tortured him, and devoted himself to his wife.

But Clara's coldness and reserve were not to be conquered.

Her thoughts still dwelt on Louis, and she was angry with herself that she had been persuaded to marry Ambrose.

Everybody declared Mr. and Mrs. Harford to be well suited to each other; but, without taking into account the disappointment of their former hopes, never were two people less calculated to be happy together.

Their tastes were different in every respect. Ambrose liked a retired life; Clara delighted in the giddy whirl of fashion, and attended

balls and parties, hoping that she might deaden the misery of her ill-considered marriage.

And while she was thus vainly striving after happiness, Ambrose remained at home, brooding over the life his own precipitancy had blighted.

Ambrose was now a changed man; he but rarely smiled—how could he, now that all brightness had faded from his existence?

Mr. Marlow noticed the altered manner of his *protege*, and frequently questioned him concerning it.

But Ambrose replied evasively; he had no wish to parade his misery, and felt that, if once he spoke of his unhappiness, he should quarrel with his guardian for having been the cause that he had wedded with Clara Farman.

"If my wife but manifested the slightest disposition toward me," he thought, "I might learn to love her; but daily, hourly, she plainly shows that she detests me."

One morning Ambrose had occasion to go to the West End of London.

It was a miserable day. A cold, drizzling rain was falling.

People were hustling each other to gain a seat in the omnibuses and tram-cars, which rapidly filled, and went on their way.

Ambrose, as he walked along in his mackintosh, noticed how the stranger, by brute force, kept the weaker in the background; and stopped on seeing a young girl, whose face was almost hidden by the hood of her cloak, in vain attempting to enter one of the vehicles.

Stepping forward with the intention of making a way for her, he shouted, "Stand aside, some of you, and allow a lady to pass!"

But the young girl now appeared to have no inclination to go forward; for she uttered a little scream, and stepped back onto the pavement.

Ambrose turned and looked at her, and an exclamation escaped his lips.

Beneath the hood he beheld the features of Winifred Osmund, pale as marble.

"Winifred—Miss Osmund!" said Ambrose. "And here!"

The young girl, who appeared fearfully agitated, stretched forth her hand, which Ambrose, after a moment's hesitation, clasped.

"Are you living in London now?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Winifred; and told him how and where she was employed.

"And your father?" questioned the young man.

"My father is dead!" replied Winifred, tears filling her eyes.

The next instant she hurried from him, and entered an omnibus that had stopped to take up another passenger.

The vehicle proceeded on its journey, and Ambrose walked on, muttering, "Her desire is to avoid me, and I would have given my life to one so utterly heartless!"

When he arrived at his home Clara had gone to the opera, and would be late.

Ambrose patiently paced the room for a time; then, summoning the servant who had informed him whither his wife had gone, said, "James, I am about to return to London; tell your mistress that I may be away several days."

And, in very bad temper with himself and the world in general, quitted the house, and returned to town with the hope that in the company of his friends there he might find a brief solace for his care.

As he, with one of those friends, was walking down Regent street, the latter's attention was called to the display of portraits in the window of a fashionable photographer.

He stopped to examine them, and, pointing to a particular portrait, said, "That's a pretty face, Harford."

"Winifred!" exclaimed Harford.

"You are acquainted with the owner of that charming countenance?" said the young gentleman.

"Yes," shortly answered Ambrose.

Most unreasonably he felt annoyed at the admiration his companion exhibited.

Then Ambrose hastily entered the place, and asked, "Have you a lady named Osmund in your establishment?"

"Yes, sir," was the reply. Then opening the door of a room, in which Ambrose saw Winifred, who was busy coloring photographs,—"Miss Osmund!"

In a moment the young girl was confronting her former lover, to the great embarrassment of both.

Ambrose had entered and inquired for her on the impulse of the moment, and now felt sorry that he had done so, knowing not what to say in excuse for having so acted.

"You desire to speak to me, Mr. Harford?" Winifred faltered.

"Y-yes," replied Ambrose. Then, after a slight pause, "Pardon me, but circumstances have altered with you, and, for the sake of former days, please to consider me as your friend." And, raising his hat, was about to leave.

"Mr. Harford," cried Winifred, "why do you speak to me thus—why do you speak of former days?"

And she looked more beautiful than ever in her blushing confusion.

"Oh, Winifred—Miss Osmund, how different might matters have been! But, there! I have suffered as many others have done, and will continue to suffer so long as a false heart is hidden within a beautiful form!"

"Do not call me false; I—I was never that! It was for your sake that I—"

Ambrose looked astonished.

"What mean you?" he asked.

"My fears for you."

"Fears—for me?"

"Arthur Cavendish swore to me that, if I became your wife, he would kill you, and—"

"Oh, say no more!" cried the young man. "Why did you not tell me this before?" Then clasping her hand—"Winifred, forgive me—forgive and pity me!"

And, dashing his hand to his forehead, he rushed distractedly from the place; and, when in the street, saw his friend standing at some little distance, and, in no mood to rejoin him, hurried away in an opposite direction.

Winifred returned to her painting.

The words, "Forgive and pity me," kept ringing in her ears. What could they mean?

Then as suddenly it struck her that he had, perhaps, made another than she his wife. Her heart seemed to stand still, and the pencil she had been holding fell from her trembling fingers.

CHAPTER XII.

AFTER MARRIAGE.

It was growing dark, and a piercing wind, which seemed to cut your face as it blew against it, caused the people of Greenford to keep themselves within doors; and, as soon as the veil of night had spread itself over the place, not a soul was to be seen abroad.

There was in the wood, however, near Mr. Farman's house, one who heeded not the keen wind. The excitement which Louis Blanford was laboring under rendered him oblivious both to fatigue and cold.

He strode backward and forward among the trees, and on the exact spot where he and Clara Farman had so frequently met.

As the night became darker, so did his countenance become more cloudy.

"Will she never come?" he muttered, irritably biting his mustache. "This is the third time I have waited here, and at an hour when she herself has often expected me."

Presently, stopping in his walk,—"Can it be possible that my absence has caused her to forget me?"

Then, pacing up and down, more rapidly than ever,—"The thought enrages me! Fool—idiot that I was not to have married her, and risked the chance of obtaining her fortune! Could I ever have imagined myself to be so captivated? But, after all, no doubt 'tis because I fear Clara is lost to me that I feel so great an affection for her." Then, with a grim

smile,—"But do I love her well enough if I should have the opportunity to marry her, knowing that now she will never receive the fortune I had hoped with her?" After a moment's thought,—"No; I think not. Still, the idea of her wedding another is madness, and to think of her in the arms of my rival kills me. If her love for me was still as great as of old, would she not ere now have visited this spot in the hope of meeting me? I did not fail to remind her that it was here she would find me on my return from Paris."

With folded arms, he stood quite still, apparently reflecting deeply.

Then, as if he had suddenly made up his mind to accomplish something, he strode on through the trees; and emerging from the wood, was soon able to see the lights twinkling in the windows of Mr. Farman's residence.

When within a short distance of the building, he stopped and muttered, "If I could but see some one belonging to the house that I might learn whether Clara is in the place, or the wife of that fellow Ambrose Harford! How I hate the name!"

For some time he wandered near the place, and was about to turn away angry and disappointed, when he perceived a man coming from the back of the house.

"Now is my chance," thought Louis. "This fellow can no doubt put an end to my surmises."

The man made his way into the road, and advanced toward Blanford, who walked slowly on, allowing the other to overtake him, then stopped, and said, "It is very cold weather, my man."

"It just is, sir," was the reply; "and poor folks find it a hard matter to keep warm!" eying Louis's comfortable-looking ulster.

"Indeed!" said Blanford; "but you have good employment, I presume, judging by the house from which you but this moment came. You are a gardener, I suppose?"

"Not exactly, sir," replied the man; "I occasionally help the gardener, but there's nothing much to do this frosty weather, and if it wasn't for the kindness of the people up at the house, I don't know how me and the missus would get through this hard winter."

"Your master is a good man, then?" asked Louis.

"Yes; he is that."

"Well, I like to hear a man spoken well of by his servants. By the by, I rather fancy I am acquainted with the family by whom you are employed," said Louis, at the same time producing half a crown, and handing it to the man. "Here, my good fellow; get something to keep out the cold."

The man received the coin in astonishment; and, touching his hat, said, "Thank you, sir—thank you!" and was about to climb a stile, and proceed across the fields.

But Louis had more to learn for his half-crown, and so said, "Stay a moment, my good fellow; I wish to ask a question."

The man stopped half-way over the stile, and looked somewhat suspiciously at the speaker.

"Your master's name is Farman, is it not?" asked Louis.

"Yes," replied the man.

"If you will tell me how many the family consists of," said Blanford, annoyed that the man was not more communicative, "I shall then know if I am acquainted with him or not."

"There's only Mr. Farman and his wife," said the man, stepping down on the other side of the stile. "Good-night, sir, and thank you!"

And he commenced walking on.

"Stay!" cried Louis, excitedly. "There is a daughter; does she—"

"Oh, she's married now!" shouted the man, from some distance. "Good-night, sir!"

And he trudged along, muttering, "He seemed inclined to pump me; wonder who he is, and what he wants to know about the Farman's? An old sweetheart of Miss Clara's, per-

haps. However, he didn't get much out of me, but I got half a crown out of him." And he chuckled as he went.

Louis Blanford stamped his foot on the hard ground, and muttered between his clenched teeth, "Married—and to Ambrose Harford, of course! Curse him!"

In a strange mood, despair at losing his love and rage at losing her fortune, Louis Blanford made his way to the railway station, and curling himself up in the corner of a first-class carriage, never spoke, nor even looked up, until the train had arrived at one of the London stations.

He alighted and made his way to a hotel, and after having refreshed himself, lighted a cigar.

"Louis Blanford, you are an idiot!" he presently exclaimed, throwing himself into an arm-chair. "What right has a man who lives by his wits to think of love? Bah!—I am mistaking my annoyance at losing a fortune for grief at being robbed of a sweetheart."

Then he began to think what he should do with himself.

"I am too excited to play," he thought; "but how pass the time between now and next month, when I return to Paris?"

Finally he decided to go to some place of amusement, and after some consideration, left the hotel, with the intention of proceeding to the opera.

He was in the street, and about to hail a cab, when his attention was called to a gentleman who at that moment passed, and at sight of whom Louis clenched his fist and muttered: "Tis he! Fortunate for him that I do not meet him again in the wood, instead of in a crowded thoroughfare!"

And hailing a hansom, he jumped in, and was driven to the opera.

The house was crowded, and Louis, as he looked round, forgot for a moment his annoyance.

The curtain went up, and all eyes save only Louis's were fixed on the stage. The voice of the *prima donna* rose in liquid strains, but Louis Blanford heard it not.

He had risen from his seat impulsively, as, on looking round the house, his gaze rested on the form of a lady, beautiful and elegantly attired, in one of the boxes.

The audience were so intent on the opera that not one of them noticed the spasmodic working of his features as he gazed at the occupant of the box.

"It is Clara!" he muttered. "And how lovely—and the wife of another!"

Beside Clara were two ladies, and standing behind them a gentleman of commanding appearance.

Louis was in a feverish state of excitement—would she not look his way?

At last the curtain fell on the first act, and Clara disappeared within the box.

Louis half rose, with the intention of leaving the place, thinking, for the moment, that perhaps she was about to depart; but almost directly Clara again appeared; and, seating herself behind one of the curtains, raised an opera-glass, and slowly her looks wandered round the building.

Louis waited impatiently till her eyes should rest on the spot where he was seated, and not for a moment did he cease to gaze toward the box.

As he watched, he saw the glass for a moment pointed directly at him, then it fell from Clara's hands; and, turning pale as marble, she dropped back in her seat.

The ladies and gentlemen bent over her in anxiety, and Louis saw them lead her to the back of the box.

A smile of triumph lighted up his features; and, rising, he left the place, to await the coming out of Clara and her party, in the hope that he might gain an opportunity of speaking to her.

After watching the principal entrance for some time, his patience was rewarded by the appearance of Clara, very pale, and ever and

anon looking anxiously around, as if expecting to see some one whom she knew.

The two ladies were on either side of her, and the gentleman, carrying the bouquets and opera-glasses, followed.

Louis, from his place of observation, muttered an oath as he perceived how impossible it would be to address Clara; and his rage increased when, upon a carriage drawing up, the four entered it, and were driven swiftly away.

"Hi, cabman," shouted Louis to the driver of a hansom standing close by; "keep that carriage in sight, and I will give you half a sovereign!"

"Right ye are, sir!" said the cabman, gathering up his reins, and glad of such a fare. "Jump in!"

Crack! went his whip, and they were rattling along in the wake of the carriage, which was not far ahead.

The vehicle in which Clara was seated passed through many streets, and at last stopped at a house in one of the West End squares.

Louis then called to the cabman to stop; and, alighting and handing to the driver the promised half-sovereign, loitered about until the occupants of the carriage had entered the house.

Then he walked up to, and took note of the place, afterward making his way back to his hotel.

"Speak to her I must!" he exclaimed. "She is the wife of another, 'tis true; but I love her, and it is such an extraordinary event for Louis Blanford to be so infatuated, that he cannot consider a husband an obstacle."

The next day he made his way toward the house in the square; but thought, as he looked at it, that his chance of speaking to Clara, now that he knew her whereabouts, was as remote as ever.

At that moment, the gentleman he had seen in the box at the opera came forth; and Louis, on the impulse of the moment, followed him.

"If I could but make his acquaintance!" Louis muttered. "I might then have an opportunity of seeing and speaking to Clara."

The gentleman walked on until he had arrived near Piccadilly, when he entered one of the club-houses in that neighborhood.

Without the slightest hesitation, Blanford entered the hall, nodded familiarly to the porter, and made his way to an apartment where several gentlemen were standing or reclining on the cushioned seats.

Louis Blanford was, as we have before said, a perfect gentleman in appearance and manners, and those assembled at the club, although looking on him as a stranger, asked no questions concerning him.

Louis soon got into conversation with a young gentleman present; and being a man of the world, and well educated, able to converse on almost any subject, invariably made an impression in his favor on those with whom he conversed.

He had, in the course of conversation, managed to give the young gentleman the notion that he was at the club to meet one of its members; and when the person whom Louis had followed made his appearance, Blanford's companion approached him, addressed him as Mr. Granville, and soon the three were talking together.

Louis did not now mean to lose his ground; he had gained, and did his best to please Mr. Granville.

When the latter gentleman was about to depart, he said, "I go to Auburn Square. Does your route lie in that direction?"

Louis, of course, replied, "Yes."

And the two left the club together.

Mr. Granville was pleased with Louis Blanford; and after this they frequently met, and one day the former invited Louis to his house.

This was exactly what Blanford had desired, had striven to accomplish, and so, of course, he accepted the invitation.

Mr. Granville and his newly-found friend were seated in the former's drawing-room, when one of the ladies whom Louis had seen at

the opera entered, and whom Mr. Granville introduced as his wife.

Blanford was excitedly waiting for Clara to appear; but the time passed, and he saw nothing of her.

"Can it be that she has left the house?" he wondered.

But anxious as he was on the subject, he dared not inquire.

He and Mr. Granville now became most intimate; and on the second occasion that Louis visited the house, he saw Clara, who paled, and would have fallen, but that he threw his arm round her.

Fortunately for them, these two were the only occupants of the room.

"Clara," whispered Louis, "rouse yourself; some one may approach."

With an effort, she recovered herself, and said, "Louis, why have you come here? Is it to reproach me?"

"Reproach is useless," said he. "But, Clara, you have wrecked my life. Oh, why did you wed another?"

"They forced me to it," said Clara, falteringly. "I—I—"

"Are you happy?" asked Louis, placing his arm round her waist.

"No, Louis; I am wretched. From the time of becoming a wife, I have never ceased to bewail my fate."

Blanford's face brightened.

"Then you still love me, Clara?" he asked, eagerly.

"No, no; go away!" excitedly cried Clara. "I have said too much already."

The man's countenance darkened.

"I will go," he said, slowly. "I will never seek again to look upon you."

For a moment Clara stood motionless, then cried, wildly, "No, Louis; let me see you sometimes. Ah, had I but possessed the fortune which is now mine!"

Louis seized her in his arms.

"Clara," he cried, "why should two lives be thus wrecked? Fly with me to another land, where we will live only for each other!"

At this moment footsteps were heard approaching, and Clara, releasing herself from his embrace, fled from the room.

Soon after, Louis took his departure, and returned to his hotel in a happy frame of mind.

"She has her fortune settled on herself," he said, "and ere long it will be within my grasp. But, putting the money affair aside, I am desperately in love with her; and it will be a bitter blow to Ambrose Harford, whom I hate almost without knowing him."

CHAPTER XIII.

A LIFE'S SORROW.

ARTHUR CAVENDISH had quite lost sight of Winifred.

He raved and was furious as he thought that, after all, she had outwitted him, and had, perhaps, already married his rival.

He believed that Mrs. Croucher could give him information on the subject, but feared to go to her house on account of Jack.

The roll in the snow which that worthy had given him was still fresh in his memory.

The love which Cavendish bore for Winifred Osmund absorbed his whole being. He could think only of her, and wandered from place to place in the hope of meeting her.

Hé became quite reckless, drank heavily, and, in fact, plunged into every dissipation in order to drown his annoyance.

But this could not last long.

His limited fortune was fast shrinking, and when that was gone what was he to do?

That he should work was out of the question.

Returning to his home one night, after having been away for some time, he sourly bade his only servant retire, and gave himself up to bitter reflection.

After sitting moodily for some time, staring into vacancy, he started to his feet, and exclaimed, "Ah, those papers may now prove of service to me!"

And going to a drawer, he took from it the packet which Winifred had received from her dying father.

Unfolding one of the papers it contained, Cavendish carefully read it, and then, refolding it, placed the packet in his breast pocket and went to bed.

Next morning he left home rather early, and made his way to London, and thence to the Hall, the residence of Mr. Marlow.

That gentleman was in his library brooding over the fact, which he had now fully ascertained, that his *protege* was anything but happy with his wife, and was thinking that, after all, perhaps he had compelled the young man to marry against his inclinations, when a servant entered, and announced that a gentleman wished to see Mr. Marlow on most important business.

"Show him up, James," said Mr. Marlow, wondering who his visitor could be.

In a few moments Mr. Arthur Cavendish entered, and questioned: "Mr. Marlow?"

"Yes," said that gentleman. "Be seated."

Arthur drew from his pocket the packet, and handed it to Mr. Marlow, saying, "I believe that these papers concern, and, indeed, belong to you."

Mr. Marlow took the packet and turned it over and over without opening it.

"What is this, and how can its contents concern me?" he asked.

"I one day found it in the road near my house, and, anxious to discover the owner, opened it, and, by the little which I read, ascertained that it must belong to you."

Mr. Marlow now became more interested, and hastily tore away the wrapper.

Cavendish watched his movements intently.

Having unfolded a large sheet of paper, Mr. Marlow hastily glanced over it, and, falling back in his chair, groaned, "Oh, Heaven!" and, burying his face in his hands, trembled violently.

Cavendish looked on quite unmoved. He had expected something of this sort to occur.

Having somewhat recovered himself, Mr. Marlow raised his head and said, "And you say the packet was found by you?"

"Yes," replied Arthur.

"Although its contents, as you have of course observed, have given me great pain, I thank you for bringing the packet hither. If you desire a reward—"

"Thank you," said Arthur, now satisfied that he had not had all his trouble for nothing; "as I am not in very prosperous circumstances."

And he took the bank-note which Mr. Marlow offered him—and which far exceeded any sum that he had hoped to receive—and, well satisfied with his excursion, declared his gratitude, and took his leave.

Left alone, Mr. Marlow again turned his attention to the papers, which he carefully perused.

"I am now indeed punished!" he groaned; and, throwing his arms across the table, and resting his head on them, remained in that position until aroused by the entrance of his *protege*, who appeared greatly excited.

Mr. Marlow looked up, and Ambrose recoiled on beholding the pallid, care-worn face of his guardian.

"Ah!" exclaimed the young man; "your looks tell me that you have learned all!"

"You know my secret?" stammered Mr. Marlow, profoundly astonished.

"Since you term it *your* secret, sir—yes!" replied Ambrose, bitterly. "What of my honorable name now?"

"Boy, this is too much!" almost shrieked his guardian.

"You are indignant, sir," said the young man. "But 'tis I who have the greatest cause for indignation—I, whose life and honor are blasted!" And he threw a letter on the table as he spoke.

Mr. Marlow, in an apparently exhausted state, had dropped into the seat, from which he had just before risen.

"Read that!" said Ambrose, pushing the letter across the table.

"What is it?" asked his guardian. And, as he attempted to read it: "I cannot see; I am dizzy. Read it!—read it!"

Ambrose snatched up the sheet of paper, and read:

"Forced to wed one, with my heart already given to another, I have suffered the worst of tortures, and now seek to end them by flying with a man who is dearer to me than my life.

"Forgive me! I need not say, do not seek me. In all probability we shall never meet again."

"CLARA."

"My poor boy!" said his guardian; "'tis on me that your anger should fall. How terribly have I been deceived! I knew naught of this!"

"Is it from me that you have first heard of this miserable affair?"

"Yes."

"Then why your agitation when I entered?"

"It was caused by another and far more wretched matter. Your wife was worthless, and desires not consideration, while"—and here his voice sunk so low that Ambrose heard not his words—"mine was true and faithful, and I drove her from me—to die!"

Ambrose, who had at first felt inclined to quarrel with his guardian, now felt pity for him, and wondered what could have so terribly affected him.

The questions he asked, Mr Marlow seemed powerless to answer, and soon retired to his room.

Ambrose's head was in a whirl. What was the meaning of it all?

"Well," he muttered, "I shall not break my heart over the disappearance of my wife; and but for the stain upon my name should perhaps and not without reason—hail the occurrence with delight!"

Little Mr. Farman was in despair; he rushed about like a madman; and tumbling into Mr. Marlow's presence, cried, "Oh, my boy, ain't it awful? The hussy!—only to think—" Then noticing the pale face of his friend, "It's quite knocked you up, my boy; and no wonder! What me and her poor mother's going to do over it, I can't say!"

And he polished his bald pate vigorously with his handkerchief.

CHAPTER XIV.

HER FIRST LOVE.

A SERIOUS illness to Mr. Marlow resulted from the shock his nervous system had received.

Ambrose would have thought that the unfortunate termination to his marriage was the terrible shock, but his guardian had assured him that it was caused by a sorrow entirely his own.

What that sorrow could be the young man had not the slightest idea, and when, after many weary weeks, his guardian was convalescent, had a mind to question him on the subject, but, as we shall presently see, had no occasion to do that.

Ambrose contrived to keep secret to the world the elopement of his wife.

Mr. Marlow was extravagant in his sorrow for the "bereaved husband," as he termed Ambrose.

"The wicked, artful minx!" he went on, bustling all over the room. "Her anxiety to have her fortune made over entirely to herself was for this—this—the dishonor of two noble families! I'm sorry, my boy—sorry!"

And he trotted hastily away.

Mr. Marlow became at last well enough to leave his chamber; and one day, when seated by the library fire, he sent for his *protege* to come to him.

"Ambrose," began Mr. Marlow, "you cannot tell how deeply sorry I am for the trouble that, through me, has fallen upon you. But, believe me, it was with the best motives that I wished your marriage to take place, and indeed I am deceived as greatly as yourself."

"Do not speak of it, sir," said Ambrose.

"I hope never again to hear her name. You must know that there was never the slightest affection on either side. At first I felt angry with you for having promoted the marriage, but that anger vanished on beholding you bowed down by some other and greater sorrow."

"Bless you!" feelingly said Mr. Marlow. "You are a good boy so readily to forgive!"

The young man was greatly moved by this, and grasped his guardian's hand with tears in his eyes, but spoke not.

After a few moments' pause, Mr. Marlow said, "And now, Ambrose, I have sent for you here to intrust you with a secret which has long embittered my life!"

Ambrose prepared to listen, and Mr. Marlow commenced.

"When a young man of about your age, I became enamored of a beautiful girl, whose parents were in a far lower station in life than my own. However, I married her, and for a time our happiness was without a cloud. But one fatal day I heard that my wife visited and corresponded with a young fellow of wild and reckless habits. I upbraided her, and gave her an opportunity to explain her conduct, but she was silent. One day she was missing, and I then concluded that she had eloped."

Here he paused, seemingly quite overcome. Presently he resumed:—

"I was crushed. I had loved my wife passionately. Soon after, my father died. I inherited his wealth, and dwelt in solitude. Then, adopting you, I gradually became more resigned, and determined that when you had grown to manhood I would myself choose a wife for you, thus preventing you from falling into the fatal error which had destroyed my happiness. Ah, you wince! And better indeed had I left you to your own choice!"

"Go on, sir," said Ambrose, deeply interested.

"When you came in that day and found me so agitated," continued Mr. Marlow, "I had just received from a man a packet of papers which he had found. On examining them, I discovered a letter written by my wife, stating that she had fled only because unable longer to endure the scorn and contempt with which I treated her. The young man who had caused my suspicions was a near relative, in whom she was greatly interested, and whom, with the aid of money, she had saved from the consequences of a crime he had committed."

Here again Mr. Marlow paused for a few moments.

"There was also," he continued, "a letter written by the person at whose house she had taken refuge, and stating that my poor wife had died in giving birth to a daughter, and this person asked forgiveness for not having at once given the child to me. But his excuse was that, being childless himself, he could not part with her, so brought her up as his own; and he concluded by saying that when this letter met my view he would be no more."

Ambrose drew a long breath, and asked, "You will claim your daughter?"

Mr. Marlow sadly shook his head, and said: "Unfortunately, there is no address on either of the documents; in fact, it appears as if it had been erased." And so, in truth, it had, by the hand of Arthur Cavendish, who did not wish that the father should find his daughter.

A few weeks later Ambrose received a letter bearing a foreign postmark.

It proved to be from Clara, who was, she wrote, dying, and had been justly punished for her wickedness.

Louis Blanford had soon tired of her, and having gambled away all her fortune, one night returning home infuriated by his losses and by the wine he had drunk, had struck her to the ground, and, darting from the house, was seen by her no more.

Ambrose communicated with his guardian and Mr. Farman, and the latter gentleman at once started for the French town whence Clara's letter was addressed, but she had died ere he reached there, a victim to the brutality

of her lover, and a prey to her too late remorse.

Ambrose for some time felt very depressed at the sad end of the once beautiful Clara Farman, and then the memory of his true love returned to him, and eagerly did he long again to behold the charming Winifred.

She had left the photographer's, he ascertained, and wondered whither she could have fled.

At last it became a torture to him, and he resolved to visit the cottage where they first met.

CHAPTER XV.

A HAPPY MEETING.

WITHIN the little dwelling Jack Croucher was seated on a low stool, with his long legs tucked under it.

There was a blazing log-fire on the hearth, and on the table was spread the supper-cloth, but, as yet, no eatables upon it.

"I hope she won't be long," muttered Jack, as he refilled his short, black clay pipe.

Then sticking it in one corner of his mouth, upside down, he mumbled through the other corner, "I'm mighty hungry after such a hard day's work."

Then taking the pipe from his mouth, and staring with a broad grin at the blazing log, "Lor', how different things is with me now! I goes to work reg'lar, I comes home reg'lar, and I keeps away from the 'Stag's Head' reg'lar."

Then becoming serious, and shaking his head solemnly, "But it's a mighty hard thing to pass the 'Stag's Head,' when it looks so nice and comfortable. Sartin I has to look another way, and whack the pony hard, when I pass the door, for if he went slow, I couldn't answer for myself—no, that I couldn't."

And Jack again shook his head, and puffed away at his pipe thoughtfully.

Presently the door opened, and Mrs. Croucher, with a huge basket on her arm, and covered with snow, entered.

"Dear me!" she said, depositing her basket on the floor, and shaking the snow off her shawl; "winter has set in as fierce this year as it was last."

"My eye!" ejaculated Jack. "Is it snowing like that?"

"Don't you see it is, you long stupid!" rather sharply replied his spouse.

She was cold and cross.

After warming her hands, Mrs. Croucher removed from her basket, and placed on the table, her stock of groceries, and many other things, among which was something for supper.

The something was soon hissing and spluttering over the fire in the frying-pan which Jack had hastily produced from somewhere.

The two then sat down to their meal.

"It makes me feel quite wretched!" presently exclaimed the old woman; "I declare it does. Whenever I pass the old cottage now I fancy I see Mr. Osmund and Winifred at every window."

"I wish you really did see 'em, missus!" said Jack. "Then we should know the artist was alive, and that poor Miss Winifred wasn't in trouble."

"Ah," sighed Mrs. Croucher, "I wish I could hear of her! 'Tis very strange!"

The two sat talking in this strain for some time, until the good wife thought it was about time they should retire for the night.

They were about to make their way behind the curtain, which parted off the one large room into a bed-chamber, when Jack, who held the candle, exclaimed, "Missus, what's that?"

"What's what, you stupid?" asked his wife.

"Why that?" replied Jack, holding his finger in a listening attitude.

Mrs. Croucher listened also, and said: "It's only the wind! Get to bed, do!"

But Jack did not seem at all inclined to obey, for he went to the door, and opening it,

letting in the drifting snow, and holding the candle above his head, peered out into the darkness.

"Anybody there?" he asked.

He was answered by a faint moaning.

"Missus," earnestly said Jack, "here's some poor creature in the snow, and I'm going to find 'em!"

Whereupon he stepped outside.

Presently Jack returned, half leading, half-carrying Winifred Osmund.

Mrs. Croucher rushed forward, and clasped the girl in her arms.

"Oh, my pretty dear!" she cried. "Come to the fire! Shut the door, Jack, and throw on some more logs!"

"Thank goodness!" faintly murmured Winifred, as she sunk on Jack's stool before the blazing fire.

Mrs. Croucher then proceeded to remove the girl's wraps, asking questions one after another, without giving Winifred time to reply.

"And just as we were talking of you," Mrs. Croucher said, "to think you should have been near all the time! Why didn't you let us know that you were coming, my dear? Jack would have driven you from the station in his little cart."

"That I would!" mumbled Jack, who stood leaning against the wall.

"I made up my mind suddenly to come and stay awhile, if you would have me," said Winifred, "and started at once on my journey, never thinking of the probability of night coming on before I should arrive; and when I had traveled but half-way from the station it grew very dark, and I experienced great difficulty in finding my way to you. I had fallen down in the snow, and was so frightened that I nearly fainted, when I heard the welcome voice of your husband, and knew then that I was safe."

"Ah, my dear Miss Winifred, you don't know how glad we are to see you!" said Mrs. Croucher.

"And, miss," said Jack, rather hesitatingly, "I beg pardon, but have you heard how the young gentleman is getting on—him as was staying at the 'Stag's Head' last winter?"

Winifred looked serious, and glanced at Mrs. Croucher, as much as to say, "I would rather not be questioned concerning him."

The good woman, looking sternly at her husband, said: "You'd best mind your own business, and not bother your stupid head about things that don't concern you! Never mind, dear" (to Winifred); "but I must say that Jack took a great liking to the young fellow, when I didn't like him at all."

"I always put my foot in it!" muttered Jack. Then, aloud, "Missus, I'll go and have a look at the pony. I daresay you two will be glad to get rid of me." And as he opened the door, and stepped out into the night, "Females always has a lot of secrets to tell one another."

Having visited the little shed which was used as a stable, and ascertained that the pony was all right, Jack extinguished the lantern which he had lighted, locked the stable-door, and put the key in his pocket.

Then he stood as if making up his mind as to what he should do with himself next.

"The missus and the gal will like to be left alone for a time," he thought, "but I don't fancy staying out in the cold. But where am I to go? Not to the 'Stag's Head.' No; that would never do. I'm a teetotaler." Then, walking slowly along, "I may as well take a turn that way, though; it's easier walking on that road. But I sha'n't go in. No; not a bit of it!"

He pulled his hat over his eyes and strode forward, and upon reaching the tavern walked straight in, without hesitation, and took the seat in the public room which formerly he had occupied but too frequently.

At closing time Jack was led out into the road, and left with his face turned in the direction of his home, and told to keep straight on.

He reeled along in the deep snow, singing snatches of an old ditty.

When near the cottage in which the artist had dwelt, he stumbled and fell, rolling over and over.

Muttering and grumbling to himself, he crawled on his hands and knees to a hedge close by, and rolled under it.

Jack had been snoring loudly for some time, when a man wrapped in a long coat approached the cottage.

At the gate he stopped, and stood with melancholy expression, gazing up at the windows of the little building.

"There is no light," he murmured. "Can it be that the cottage is altogether deserted? Oh, Winifred, it is heartbreaking to look upon the place where first I saw and loved you, and to know that you are no longer there."

Then, leaning his arms on the gate, he stood heedless of the snow, which now again was falling heavily.

Presently arousing, he said, "I will go to Jack Croucher; from him I may learn something."

He had gone but a few steps, when a hand was placed roughly on his shoulder, and, turning sharply round, he saw in the uncertain light the visage of Arthur Cavendish, worn and haggard, and with an expression of reckless despair.

"Ambrose Harford!" said he, in an unsteady voice.

He had been drinking deeply.

"You are my evil genius; you have sent me to the dogs. But for you, I should have won the woman I love dearer than my life; and, curse you! you stole her heart from me. I told her I would kill you if ever she became yours. She feared me, and sent you from her. But think not that she will ever be your wife. No, I shall take care to prevent that."

And, drawing from his breast a long dagger he rushed frantically on Ambrose, who leaped back in time to escape a blow aimed at his heart.

"Think not to escape me!" yelled Cavendish.

And the next moment the two were struggling desperately.

They fell to the ground together, and rolled panting in the snow, Ambrose attempting with all his strength to prevent his opponent from gaining an opportunity of using the weapon.

With a sudden jerk, Cavendish freed his right hand, and clutching at the throat of Ambrose with the other, raised the dagger prepared to strike.

Harford was powerless in his clutch; Cavendish was like a madman, and possessed a madman's strength.

His features were horrible in their expression, and he was about to bury the dagger in Ambrose's heart, when Jack Croucher, who had been awakened, and sobered, too, by the frantic yelling of Cavendish, rushed to the spot, and dealing the would-be-assassin a heavy blow with his clenched fist, assisted Ambrose to rise.

"Lor', sir!" he exclaimed, "is it you? I'm mighty glad now, that I so far forgot myself as to go to the 'Stag's Head.'"

Ambrose shook Jack by the hand, and thanked him for his timely assistance.

Then the two looked round for Cavendish; but that gentleman had disappeared, leaving a track in the snow where he had crawled.

"You'd best come along with me, sir," said Jack.

"I was making my way to your house when that fellow attacked me," said Ambrose; "and now will, with pleasure, accompany you, and with the hope that you may be able to give me news of Miss Osmund."

"That I can," said Jack, with a sly grin; "so come along."

They were soon at the door of the little wooden cottage. Jack pushed it open, and stepped in first.

"Oh, you good-for-nothing, long, awkward

fellow!" cried his wife, rising hastily from her chair, and advancing toward him.

Jack smiled blandly.

"Don't be cross, missus," he said. "I've done better than staying here. Come in, sir."

Ambrose entered, and seeing Winifred seated there, rushed forward, exclaiming, "Dearest, then I have found you!"

And without resistance from the young girl, he seized and clasped her in his arms.

"And this is your doing, Jack?" asked Mrs. Croucher.

Jack nodded, with a broad grin; and his wife, rushing at him, hugged the big fellow with all her might.

Mr. Marlow was startled from a reverie by the entrance of his *protege*, who appeared very excited.

"Well, Ambrose, what is it?" he asked.

"You remember, sir, my telling you of an attachment I had formed for a young lady whose name you would not permit me to mention?"

"I remember," said Mr. Marlow.

"And will you still forbid me to wed where my heart has chosen?"

"No, Ambrose," earnestly cried his guardian.

The young man hurried from the apartment, and presently returned, accompanied by Winifred, looking charmingly beautiful in her blushing confusion.

"This lady, sir," said Ambrose, "I present to you as my future wife."

His guardian stood a moment as if petrified; then exclaimed, "Ambrose, you have found my daughter!"

"Your daughter, sir—Winifred?" cried the young man.

"I cannot doubt it—the perfect image of my poor lost wife. Oh, what misery I might have spared us all!"

He then produced the papers, which Winifred immediately recognized as those given to her by the artist, and with father and lover, blessed indeed was she now.

Mr. and Mrs. Farman had somewhat recovered from the grief caused by their daughter's sad end, and congratulated Ambrose and his guardian; but the tears rolled fast down the little man's cheeks as he looked on Winifred, and thought of his own beautiful daughter and her sad end, and he rubbed away at his bald pate incessantly to hide his emotion.

In the following spring, those two who had suffered so much for each other's sake were married, and Mrs. Croucher and Jack, who had not yet again visited the "Stag's Head," were present.

The lifeless body of Cavendish was found in a mill-stream, at no great distance from the cottage so long inhabited by the artist.

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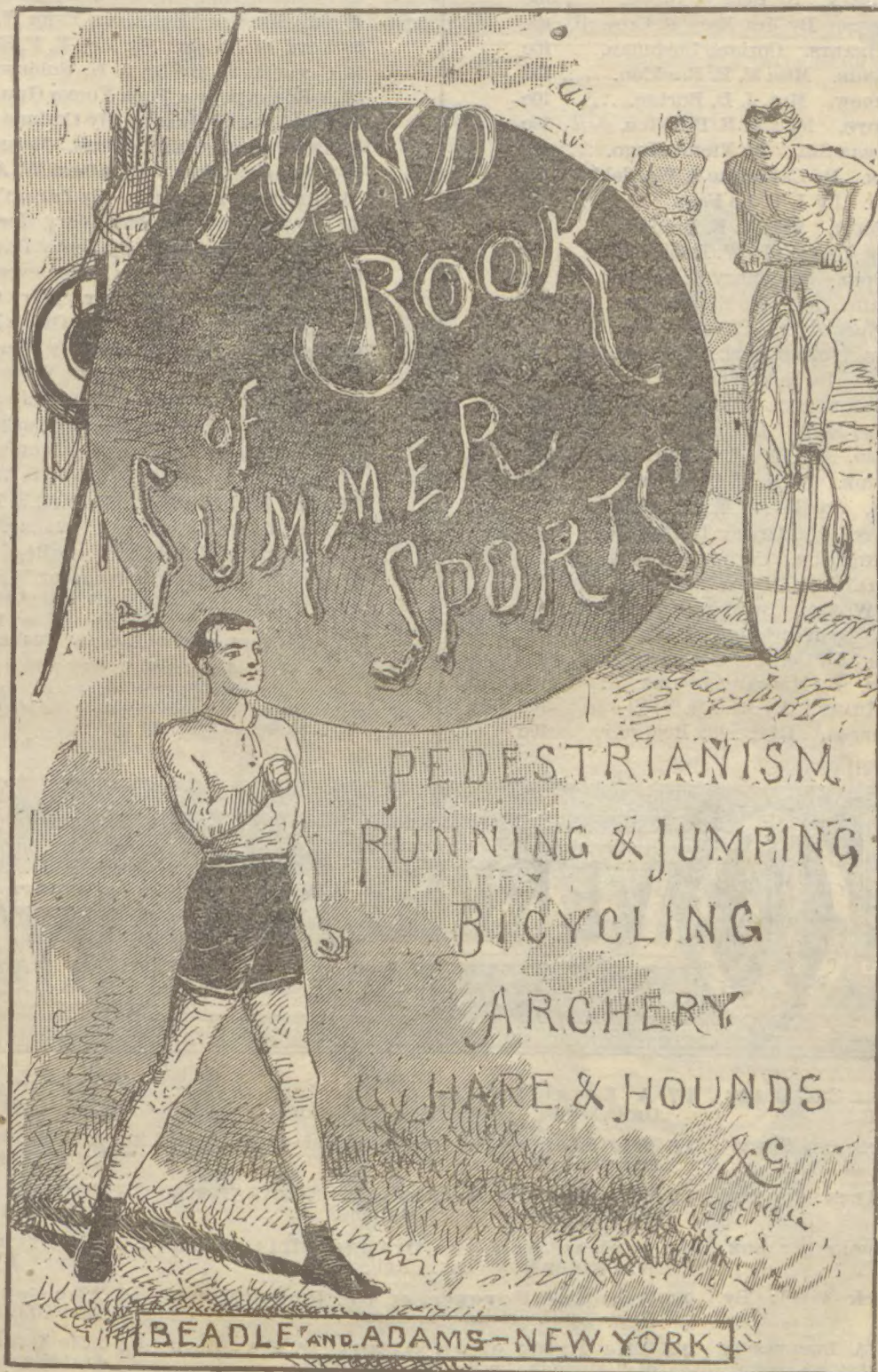
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